FEMINIST LEADERSHIP

IN THE VICTORIAN SPECIALIST FAMILY VIOLENCE AND PREVENTION OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN SECTORS

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WDI
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Acknowledgements

The Institute would like to acknowledge the people of the Woi wurrung and Boon wurrung language groups the eastern Kulin Nations as the Traditional Owners of the land on which we work. We respectfully recognise Ancestors and Elders, past and present.

We also acknowledge all of those in our communities who have been impacted by violence against women or family violence - the victim survivors, their families, and their friends – many of whom have played significant leadership and advocacy roles in Victoria's family violence and primary prevention systems.

We interviewed a wide variety of individuals for this report, the majority of whom were women. We aimed to hear from as many diverse voices as possible from across the prevention and response sectors, including people from a range of different backgrounds, at different levels of leadership, and who had varying levels of expertise in the field. We spoke to people who had worked in the prevention or response fields for over four decades, and some who were much newer to feminist work in this space. We spoke to people who had worked in Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations, disability services, the LGBTIQ sector, legal services, regional family violence services, sexual assault services, and agencies who support children and young people or work with perpetrators of family violence. We spoke to women with significant expertise in government leadership, public policy and governance, people with backgrounds in research, and specialists in the primary prevention of violence against women.

We would like to thank all the interview participants for their generosity in sharing their time and expertise with us.

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Executive Summary

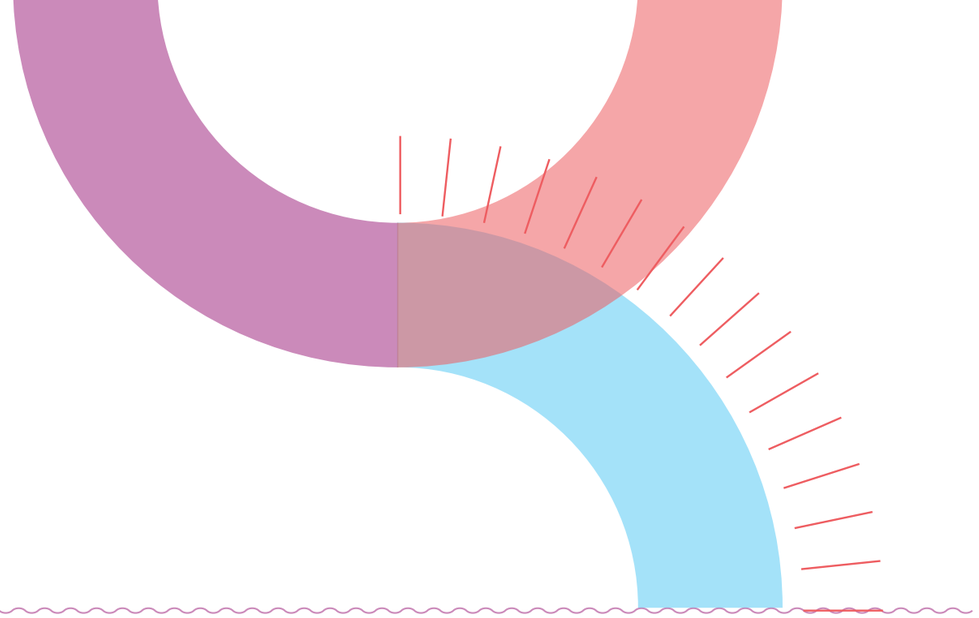
Feminist leadership practices are deeply embedded in the Victorian specialist family violence (FV) and prevention of violence against women (PVAW) sectors and have played an instrumental role in shining a light on the issue of gendered violence across the country. This research into feminist leadership has been undertaken in the midst of a once in a generation reform in Victoria. It explores the strengths, limitations and tensions of feminist leadership practices within these two sectors, and explores their relationship with government in the context of the ongoing family violence reform.

The report was commissioned by Family Safety Victoria (FSV) and produced by the Workforce Innovation and Development Institute with the purpose of better understanding how feminist leadership is undertaken within the family violence and primary prevention sectors. It draws on recent scholarship in the field and qualitative data from interviews with 22 sector leaders from diverse backgrounds working across the specialist FV and PVAW sectors, as well as in government.

As a starting point for our conversations with sector leaders, we developed a set of working definitions of *feminist leadership, feminist management and feminist governance* which were tested with research participants to identify areas of resonance with their own leadership practices as well as points of departure. Their feedback was then used to refine and improve these working definitions which are shared in the report as a catalyst for further reflection upon feminist leadership practices both within and outside of the sectors. It is hoped that our definitions will continue to evolve and be strengthened by future research and leadership from the specialist sectors who drive this crucial work.

During these discussions, several key themes emerged including the importance of having shared values and mission; the critical role collectively, collaboration and partnership play within feminist leadership; the necessity of accountability, transparency and the ongoing critique of power structures; the importance of embedding an intersectional lens; and the merits of being open to change and growth as a leader.

Feminist leadership within the sectors was seen to be driven by a shared vision of social transformation built around collective goals of equality, justice, inclusion, and freedom from violence for all. Commensurate with such goals was the recognition that wide scale social and systemic change is impossible for individuals to achieve alone. The sheer scale of the endeavour requires a collective approach; when feminist leaders work together, supported by their peers and the broader feminist movement, they increase their chances of enacting meaningful social change.



Collectivity was understood to be a powerful tool in this quest for social transformation. Working collaboratively as a collective with a shared purpose provides opportunities for sector leaders to develop shared visions and goals, undertake joint strategic planning and advocacy; ensure consistent messaging to community, government and media; share knowledge and resources; seek and provide peer support; and build and maintain professional relationships and networks. Such work was considered an intrinsic part of their feminist leadership as it supports them in navigating complex issues and situations, brings together people with expertise across diverse areas, and provides opportunities for those without formal organisational leadership roles to exert influence.

Feminist leadership within the sectors was also characterised by the ongoing and explicit critique of power structures within organisations. It was expected that sector leaders would visibly critique their own use of power, and that of their peers, and work to neutralise oppressive power structures and seek to dismantle existing systems of oppression wherever they found them. Intersectionality was seen as inextricably connected to feminist leadership and highly valued by those across both sectors; the importance of both governments and sectors having a long term, embedded approach to intersectionality as a part of their feminist framework was seen as a critical enabler not only of feminist leadership, but of the work that feminist leaders undertake.

The concepts of accountability and transparency also emerged as a key theme in the research, with participants identifying a range of different areas and levels of accountability for feminist leaders including to the organisation, to themselves, to each other, to their staff, to victim-survivors, and to the broader feminist movement. Transparency was seen to play a key role in ensuring appropriate levels of accountability within organisations. Having the courage to have hard conversations about a wide range of issues, and being willing and able to challenging the status quo and dominant ways of thinking were also considered crucial to effective feminist leadership, and to the progression of the feminist movement to end violence against women and family violence more broadly. However, as part of these discussions a concern was raised that the appetite for such conversations within the sectors had waned over recent years and that this is something that was important to address collectively to ensure the progression of feminist leadership practices across the sectors.

Increased understanding of feminist ways of working by those external to the sectors was frequently cited as enabler of effective feminist leadership within the sectors. When stakeholders, partners, board members, and government are open to building a deep understanding of how critical feminist leadership is to the work to end violence – or further, where they were open to applying feminist principles and practices in their own work – this was seen to create an environment more supportive of feminist leadership practices and broader feminist goals. Additionally, when feminist knowledge and expertise was appropriately trusted and valued by government, it

served to strengthen feminist leadership practices within the sectors, which ultimately benefits the work that these sectors lead in the community.

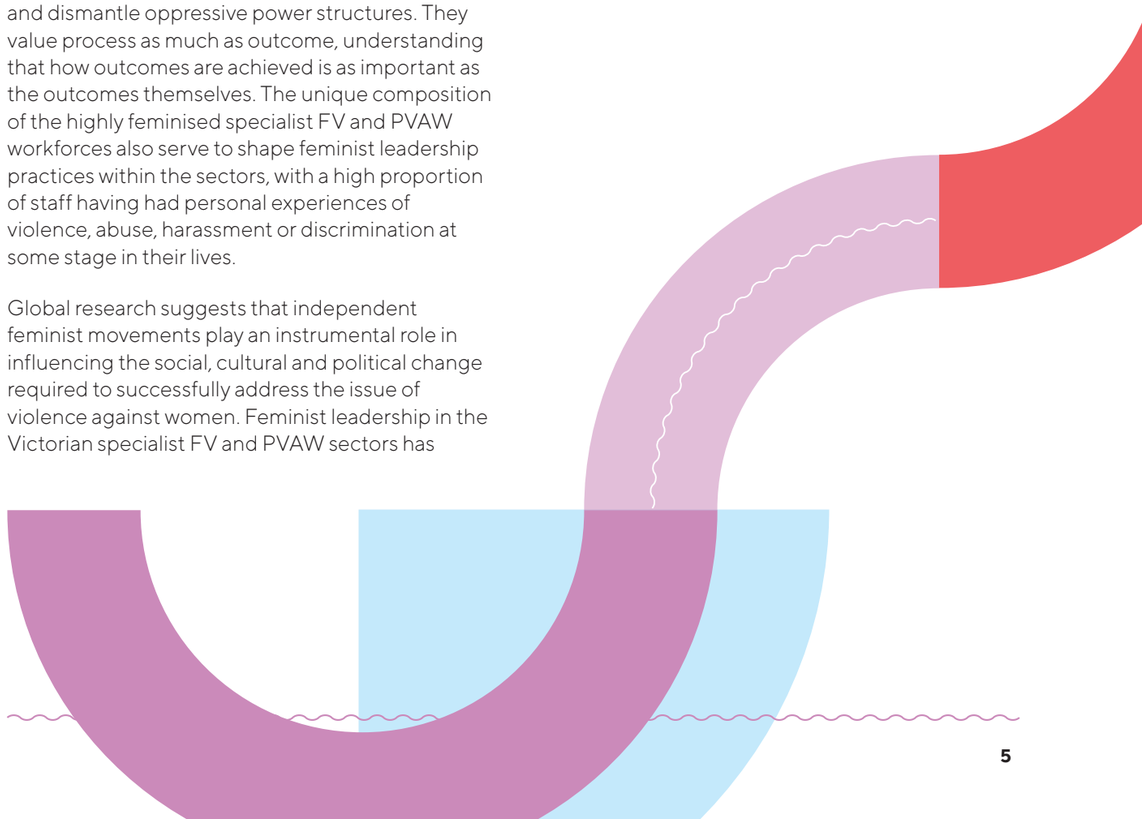
Feminist leadership was considered easier to practice effectively when long-term feminist goals of systemic change were understood, valued and used as a marker of success. Currently, the key measures of success within the sectors are short term outputs and outcomes linked to funding obligations, which many felt obfuscated the true value of feminist leadership and the work their organisations led. Whilst participants were interested in the immediate impact of their work, and strongly supportive of having accountability mechanisms in place for the funding they received, they were also interested in measuring their success against long-term, overarching feminist goals of social and systemic transformation. However, there was general acknowledgement that such goals are very difficult to achieve when working within existing systems of oppression such as patriarchy, colonialism, capitalism and racism.

A clear evidence base, coupled with appropriate use of gendered language, were also seen as enablers of feminist leadership practice within the sectors. Whilst much work has already been done to build the evidence base around men's intimate partner violence against women, other forms of family violence remain less well understood. Interview data suggest that the development of a clear evidence base addressing the diverse forms of family violence, and the unique and specific dynamics associated with these forms, would support feminist leadership practices. Additionally, a number of participants were concerned that a current push towards the de-gendering of language (as opposed to the appropriate use of both gendered, and gender neutral language) in the field may undermine the decades of work experts have dedicated to compiling the evidence base around the gendered nature of much of the violence occurring in homes and communities around the country.

Adequate funding, resourcing and time were also considered key enablers of feminist leadership practice within the specialist FV and PVAW sectors. Despite significant increases in funding to both sectors as a result of the Royal Commission reforms, service demand continues to outstrip capacity. Sustainable, long-term funding was seen as a way of increasing stability within the sector, reducing staffing churn, providing greater opportunity for career mentoring, leadership training and succession planning, and enabling more effective feminist leadership practice across both prevention and response. Due to demand pressures and funding constraints, participants reported having insufficient time for activities such as reflective practice, professional learning, collaboration and partnership, and strategic advocacy, all of which were considered critical components of feminist leadership.

Feminist leadership practice within the specialist FV and PVAW sectors sets itself apart from more standard models of leadership practice through its overarching vision of systemic and social transformation. Sector leaders, and the staff who work with them seek to model the change they want to see in the world, working to make visible and dismantle oppressive power structures. They value process as much as outcome, understanding that how outcomes are achieved is as important as the outcomes themselves. The unique composition of the highly feminised specialist FV and PVAW workforces also serve to shape feminist leadership practices within the sectors, with a high proportion of staff having had personal experiences of violence, abuse, harassment or discrimination at some stage in their lives.

Global research suggests that independent feminist movements play an instrumental role in influencing the social, cultural and political change required to successfully address the issue of violence against women. Feminist leadership in the Victorian specialist FV and PVAW sectors has already raised the profile of the epidemic of violence against women (and, to a lesser degree, raised the profile of other forms of family violence) within the community, built a strong evidence base around the gendered nature of this violence, enabled the creation of policy, legislative and regulatory responses, and shifted the attitudes of both government and the community about the gendered nature of the issue. Strong, independent feminist leadership is crucial to achieving a society based on equality, justice, diversity, safety, and inclusion.



Introduction

Feminist leadership practice has been fundamental to the establishment and growth of the Victorian specialist family violence (FV) and prevention of violence against women (PVAW) sectors. Each have proud traditions of advocacy and have played key roles in raising awareness and improving understanding of the gendered nature of violence across the Victorian community. Sector leaders, and the staff who work with them, are driven by a collective feminist vision of a world built upon equality, justice, freedom from violence, and inclusion for all.

Family violence is one of the most significant health, safety, crime and economic issues Victoria currently faces. Whilst it can affect anyone, research has shown that it is predominantly a gendered issue, with most family violence being perpetrated against women, by men. Across Australia, intimate partner violence causes more illness, disability and deaths than any other risk factor for women aged 25 – 44. Approximately 1 in 4 women have experienced physical or sexual violence by a current or former intimate partner since the age of 15. On average, one woman a week is murdered nationally by her current or former partner.

According to recent data released by the Victorian Government's Crime Statistic's Agency, the total number of family violence-related offences recorded in Victoria increased by 11.3% in the year ending March 2021. Family violence was responsible for one in five criminal offences committed in the state during this period. Whilst this rise in family violence-related offences coincided with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the trend cannot be explained by the pandemic alone as the last three years have shown a steady rise in family violence related offenses within the state.

The costs of family violence and other forms of violence against women are enormous. At a personal level it can result in physical injury, emotional suffering, psychological trauma, and, in the worst cases, death. Beyond the personal harm, it results in significant economic costs for both the individuals involved and the broader society. In 2015-2016, the total cost of family violence in Victoria was estimated to be $5.3 billion, with $1.8 billion borne by government, $2.6 billion by individuals and their families, and $918 million by the Victorian community and broader economy.

Family violence is an ongoing and escalating crisis in our state which requires innovative and creative solutions. The recent Royal Commission into family violence and subsequent reforms reflect the current government's commitment to addressing the issue, but much work remains to be done and feminist leadership has a critical role to play. As a practice, feminist leadership strives to create new systems, structures and societies that are equitable, diverse, inclusive, accountable, free from violence and gender-aware, goals which are in alignment with the ultimate aims of primary prevention and family response work.

We recognise that 'feminist practice' and 'feminism' are concepts which are deeply and personally held and are in a continual process of evolution. We do not intend for this report to be prescriptive; rather we are interested in exploring what is currently happening in the Victorian family violence (FV) and prevention of violence against women (PVAW) sectors regarding feminist leadership practice, and what is considered important in this area by those working in these sectors, given how integral feminist leadership is to their work. We recognise that these views will not necessarily be representative of all the diverse views about and experiences of feminist leadership in Victoria, and as such we encourage readers to see these findings as a starting point for reflection rather than a definitive statement on what feminist leadership is – and is not – in Victoria. We hope this report will represent an important step towards further discussion, clarifying goals, promoting self-reflection, and encouraging more deliberate approaches to feminist leadership practice within the Victorian FV and PVAW sectors.

Context

The early years

The Victorian specialist family violence sector emerged from the women's refuge movement of the 1970s, evolving in response to an urgent need for services for women and children seeking emergency accommodation and other support. Many were fleeing situations of family violence at a time when there was little community awareness of the issue. These early refuges were founded by close-knit groups of feminist activists.

Initially run by dedicated volunteers with shared goals of gender equality and safety for women, they laid the foundations for the Victorian family violence sector as we know it today. Organised around principles of shared leadership and consensus decision-making, they emphasised acts of leadership over the concept of the charismatic leader. They encouraged the full participation of residents in decision-making, aiming to achieve social transformation via the promotion of female empowerment. The legacy of these collective models of working is still visible in the structure and governance of many organisations in existence today.

In June of 1975, in response to strong lobbying from the women's refuge movement across the country, the Whitlam Government announced the first federal funding for a national women's refuge program. In the decades which followed, numerous additional refuges and women's housing services were established. Staff wages in these organisations were very low, particularly for those in direct service roles, and many of the staff learnt "on the job" in a sector which was chronically underfunded and had limited resources for professional development, infrastructure, human resources, or operations support. Whilst the work of the specialist family violence sector has changed significantly and professionalised since those early days, the legacies of underfunding and a lack of resources for critical elements of service delivery continue in the specialist sector today.

By the mid-1990s, government funding expanded to incorporate outreach work in addition to crisis accommodation and supports. Political and social awareness of family violence had grown, bringing with it increasing pressure for the rapid expansion and professionalisation of the sector. This led to tensions within many services, particularly at the leadership level; "The movement adopted a range of strategies to ensure that feminist ideas and ways of organising were not compromised by their engagement with the state."

Victoria's work on preventing violence against women grew from within and outside the work of the specialist women's sector in supporting women and children who had experienced violence. The first significant public policy focus on the primary prevention[1] of men's intimate partner violence against women occurred with the establishment of an evidence base about what drives violence against women through VicHealth's burden of disease study in 2004, followed by the first Victorian prevention framework that directly informed the Victorian government's first standalone primary prevention strategy, A Right to Respect. Unfortunately, this state-wide prevention strategy was never fully implemented, but the evidence base developed by VicHealth led to the development of a national prevention framework in Change the Story and drove a significant amount of funding and community-based prevention activity across the state.

Two decades of reform

In October 2002 the Bracks Labor government launched the Women's Safety Strategy, a policy framework aiming to reduce violence against women which was the first significant and dedicated state-wide public policy on the issue of violence against women and women's safety in Victoria. This was followed by the Victorian Family Violence Reforms (VFVR) strategy in 2005, representing a whole of government approach to the issue of family violence reform. Driven by the idea that an effective response required an integrated system of government and non-government agencies at both state and regional level, the strategy sought to redesign Victoria's response to the problem at a system level. Further reforms followed, including the passing of the *Family Violence Protection Act 2008* (Vic.) (FVPA), which sought to maximise the protection and safety of people who have experienced family violence. In late 2014, the newly elected Premier Daniel Andrews announced a Royal Commission into family violence, characterising it as "the most urgent law and order emergency occurring in our state and the most unspeakable crime unfolding across our nation."

These sweeping state interventions and reforms have resulted in rapid and significant sector-wide change and the slow but continued growth of a dedicated prevention sector. Whilst most in the field have welcomed the opportunities inherent in the most recent Royal Commission reforms, many also share concerns about the level of change, the processes used to drive these changes, and the unrealistic pace which has proven difficult for organisations to manage due to lack of time and resources. Sector leaders have found themselves navigating the rapid growth of services, significant changes to policy, legislative and service provision models/frameworks, grappling with shifts to the sector make-up and skilled staffing shortages at the same time as managing staff anxieties against the backdrop of significant change and an uncertain future. Furthermore, the ongoing COVID-19 crisis continues to have dramatic impacts across the sectors, adding to this sense of unpredictability.

This uncertainty has been amplified by the short-term nature of much of the funding received by the sector. Although overall funding for direct service delivery and one-off pilot projects associated with the implementation of Royal Commission recommendations has increased significantly over recent years, chronic shortages in core, recurrent funding has resulted in many organisations facing ongoing challenges around the sustainability of staffing and service delivery and program provision. With demand levels already outstripping existing service capacity, and a lack of funding to core organisational infrastructure (e.g. leadership, management, human resources, operations, governance, monitoring and evaluation, strategic planning etc), current funding models fall far short of what is required to meet community need in preventing and responding to violence against women and family violence, both now and in the future.

i Primary prevention – as distinct from early intervention or response focused work – aims to address the underlying drivers of violence against women that enable violence to occur. Its aim is to change the structures, norms and practices across society to prevent any violence from occurring in the first place. For more information, see *Change the Story: A shared framework for the prevention of violence against women and their children in Australia*

Methodology

This research project was commissioned by Family Safety Victoria (FSV) with the purpose of better understanding the ways in which feminist principles of leadership, management, and governance are currently informing practice within the family violence and prevention of violence against women sectors.

The research methodology comprises three key components:

1. Literature Review
2. Interviews with Victorian family violence and prevention of violence against women sector leaders
3. Action Research Group

Literature Review

The research team collected and analysed data from contemporary scholarship on feminist leadership, management and governance, and the history of the Victorian family violence and prevention of violence against women sectors. A range of secondary sources were referenced including journal articles, books, industry toolkits, and websites.

Interviews with Victorian family violence and prevention of violence against women sector leaders

Two rounds of semi-structured interviews were conducted with leaders from the Victorian specialist family violence and prevention of violence against women sectors. A total of 22 people were interviewed, 14 individually and 8 via paired interviews. Interview participants were primarily selected on the basis of holding a formal leadership role (e.g. CEO or senior management) within a specialist family violence or violence prevention organisation in Victoria, and a small number were selected on the basis of their feminist leadership on the issue of family violence in the community more broadly. Whilst we did not formally request demographic information from participants nor did we ask participants about their personal backgrounds or identities beyond their professional role, a number of interview participants spoke openly from their personal experiences as younger and older leaders, as leaders from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community, as leaders within the disability and LGBTIQ communities and as leaders with diverse racial and cultural backgrounds. This ensured that the interview participants reflected as much diversity as feasible within the confines of a project focused on feminist leadership within family violence and violence prevention organisations in Victoria.

A maximum variation sampling strategy [ii] was used to ensure coverage of a diverse range of groups including: organisations that deliver direct services to women, children, and other victim/survivors of family violence, including some that deliver services to perpetrators; agencies who design, deliver, and evaluate prevention programs; state-wide agencies with expertise in research, practice, training, advocacy and communications; agencies who focus solely on particular population groups; and government representatives. It should be recognised that the selection methods used and the power dynamics among organisations, interviewer/interviewee and the social positioning of the participants in society will have impacted on both their responses and the analysis.

The first round of interviews was held mid-2020 and the second round in May 2021. Both rounds were conducting via the Microsoft Teams video-conferencing platform and were recorded and transcribed for analysis. The interview data were analysed in NVivo to identify common themes.

Action Research Group

An Action Research Group was convened to provide specialist input into the development of interview questions, analysis of key themes emerging from the research, and feedback on draft versions of the report. This group comprised the Institute Director, the research team, one of the ten leader interviewees and a past participant of the Leadership Intensive Program (who is a leader in a sector organisation).

Research Ethics

The Institute obtained approval from the RMIT Human Research Ethics Committee to meet the requirements of the National Health and Medical Research Council's, *National Statement on the Conduct of Human Research*.

Literature Review

A review of the current literature on feminist leadership reveals a substantial body of scholarship on general theories of leadership, a smaller body of work focussing on "women's leadership" or "feminine leadership", and surprisingly little about feminist leadership itself. Research specific to feminist leadership in the Victorian family violence (FV) and prevention of violence against women (PVAW) sectors is scarcer still, tending to trace the historical impact of feminist advocacy on the establishment and development of the sectors and family violence policy rather than critiquing contemporary leadership practices. Due to the relatively small amount of research relating to feminist leadership itself, this review will also reference literature drawn from the social justice field and research into women's movements.

Despite a wealth of research into leadership theory and practice over the past century, there remains a lack of consensus regarding the definition of *leadership* itself. Early research in the field tended to focus on trait, or "great man", theories of leadership which assumed that the characteristics of a great leader were innate rather than learned. This approach was criticised by feminist scholars for centring upon "masculine" traits such as ambition,

ii Using a maximum variation sampling strategy allowed us to cover the widest variety of groups possible: large, medium and small organisations; differing degrees and levels of leadership experience; across city and regional areas; and addressing specific population sub-groups (for example, groups relating to ethnicity, age, disability experience, gender identity or sexual orientation).

dominance, and self-confidence whilst failing to identify and study the traits of women in leadership. Subsequent research into "feminine" leadership traits, whilst drawing attention to the role social gender construction plays in leadership models, came "hazardously close to essentialising women (and axiomatically, men too!)". It is also important to recognise that both approaches are premised on binary gender categories which assert that particular character traits are 'feminine' or 'masculine' without recognition that these binary categories are in and of themselves limiting and problematic.

As the field of leadership scholarship evolved, there was a shift away from trait theories of leadership emphasising the personal attributes of individual leaders, in favour of skills-based and process-driven approaches. Rather than perceiving leadership attributes to be innate, skills-based approaches are founded on the assumption that effective leadership is derived from a set of competencies which can be taught and learned. Process-based approaches seek to categorise and analyse leadership behaviours with reference to the context in which they arise. Such theories marked a gradual shift away from the concept of the *leader* towards an exploration of *leadership* itself.

The concept of transformational leadership, introduced by Downton in the 1970s and built upon by Burns and Bass in the proceeding decades, casts leaders as agents of change who promote "a vision and the path to it in such a way that the organization, the members, and even the leader can be transformed". Whilst this notion of transformation resonated with emergent feminist thinking around leadership models, its focus on the leader as a catalyst for change sat less comfortably alongside the concept of collectivity that was then (and is still, to a degree) inherent to feminist practice.

More recent post-heroic, or collective, theories of leadership are more closely aligned with feminist theory and practice, foregrounding a relational rather than individualistic approach. In such models, the concept of the leader is replaced with the notion of pluralised leadership. Networks of influence draw on the specific capabilities, skills, and resources of those within the organisation, replacing the individual, visionary agent of change. Post-heroic leadership represents a shift "from individual to collective, from control to learning, from 'self' to 'self-in-relation,' and from power over to power with", all of which are characteristics shared with feminist leadership practices. In 2010, Batliwala, feminist scholar and activist, conducted a comprehensive review and analysis of available definitions of feminist literature from source material spanning 30 years, identifying four key components of feminist leadership practice: an ongoing awareness and critique of power structures; an alignment with feminist values and principles such as equality, inclusion, accountability and transparency; being informed by feminist politics and driven by a feminist political agenda; and being practiced in ways that align with the previous three principles.

The importance of power, and the ongoing critique of power, features strongly in the literature on feminist leadership. Wakefield identifies two areas of practice in which power plays a key role. Firstly, feminist leadership practice has a responsibility to empower and enable others to act by facilitating opportunities for collective or shared leadership. Secondly, it must respectfully confront and challenge oppressive power structures within organisations and the broader society. Veneklasen and Miller identify four distinct expressions of power: 'power over', 'power with', 'power to', and 'power within'. 'Power over' is the most commonly recognised and understood form of power and is based upon domination. To have power, you must take it from someone else and then prevent others from taking it from you. 'Power with' is characterised by mutual support, collaboration, finding common ground and building and building collective strength. 'Power to' refers to people's individual agency and their capacity to shape their own lives and the world. 'Power within' refers to the self-knowledge and empathy which allows people to recognise and respect diversity.

As a result of this attempt to dismantle oppressive power structures, feminist leadership practice favours shared or participatory leadership structures. According to Williams' Principles for Feminist Leadership, "Within feminist organisations, leaders work from a vision of shared power, providing opportunities for all members to develop and use their leadership skills". Early models were based on collective leadership models where "the group or collective became the 'voice' of the women, subsuming individual identities and keeping the issue in the foreground". Over time there was a shift to hybrid organisational forms as collectives grappled with "the tyranny of structurelessness" and the realisation that the removal of formal leadership structures allowed informal leadership structures to emerge without the usual safeguards and accountability.

Of particular interest to scholars is how feminist leadership contributes to broader feminist goals of transforming our social, economic and political systems. In Australia, the impact of the feminist movement upon the development of family violence response and primary prevention policy has been significant and "...feminism's continuing influence can be seen in the way that many state and territory policies situate domestic violence within a gendered analysis and link the issue to one of women's broader inequality". Recent research exploring feminist leadership in the Australian domestic and family violence context identifies the importance of strong support and connection with the broader feminist movement to end violence against women. "The quality of leadership is linked to the extent to which collaboration and strategic alliances are built to progress a broad social agenda connected to practice". Humphreys argues that feminist leadership within the field must be adaptive due to the constant evolution of the policy and practice landscape. Furthermore, as the domestic and family violence system in Australia is highly complex, having multiple layers of intervention, those in leadership require a strong understanding of the interactions between all aspects of the intervention system to lead effectively.

Emerging research into the power of feminist movements to influence social change has important implications for feminist leadership, clearly articulating its capacity to shape social discourse and policy. Htun and Weldon's recent global comparative analysis of policy development addressing violence against women between the years of 1975 and 2005 found that "the autonomous mobilisation of feminists in domestic and transnational contexts – not Left parties, women in parliament, or national wealth – is the critical factor accounting for policy change". They argue that legal and policy reforms related to violence against women were more likely to occur in places with strong, autonomous feminist movements. Additionally, these movements have played, and continue to play, a key role in reframing violence against women as a human rights issue rather than a personal one and advocating to change social perceptions of such violence.

The Feminist Mobilization Index (FMI) was developed in 2020 and measures the existence, strength, and autonomy of feminist movements. Based on an original database of 126 counties between the years of 1975 to 2015, scores on the index range from 0 to 3 where 0 represents no feminist mobilisation and 3 reflects the movements which are the strongest and most autonomous. Australia received a score of 3 on the FMI, indicating that our feminist movements have the ability to influence the public agenda, contribute t o the shaping of popular discourse, and generate new ideas that get absorbed into the public sphere. Such research suggests that feminist movements – such as the women's refuge movement which led to the creation of the Victorian family violence response sector as we know it today, or the Victorian women's movements that advocated for a focus on prevention in this state – and the leadership that drives these movements, are crucial to successfully addressing issues such as gender equality, family violence and violence against women.

Section 1

Understanding and defining feminist leadership, feminist management and feminist governance

Before we can explore how feminist practice impacts on leadership, management and governance within the Victorian specialist family violence (FV) and prevention of violence against women (PVAW) sectors, it is important to delve into how the concept and practice of feminist leadership was defined for the purpose of this project. As noted in the literature review, this is not a simple task.

As part of the research process, we developed a set of working definitions of feminist leadership, feminist management, and feminist governance based on the literature review, interview data, and our own knowledge. We tested these definitions with the research participants to establish areas of commonality with their own feminist leadership practice as well as points of divergence. Those we interviewed identified a range of feminist principles informing their practice, with striking similarities across the interviews, as well as some differences. The definitions were then revised based on these consultations. They are offered in this report as a starting point for further conversation and practice reflections within the sector, rather than definitive, static definitions.

Working Definitions

Feminist leadership

Feminist leadership is a practice that aims to achieve personal, political, economic, structural and social transformation. It is a social action undertaken with the collective goal of undoing the system of patriarchy (including where it intersects with other systems of oppression and marginalisation) that govern the world we live in. It strives to create new systems, structures and societies that are equitable, diverse, inclusive, accountable and gender-aware. Its practice is characterised both by *what* issues feminist leaders choose to address and *how* they choose to address them. The practice of feminist leadership is also characterised by accountability, transparency, respect, courage, and an explicit awareness and ongoing critique of power structures. It requires a commitment to progressing the collective cause of creating a safer, more equitable, and fairer world, coupled with a willingness to lead difficult conversations and address conflicts where needed. An intersectional approach to feminist leadership strives to bring the diversity of women's voices and experiences to the centre, and to problematise and raise awareness of the intersections between sexism and other forms of discrimination, marginalisation and oppression. It is accountable to the women who have come before in the process of social change and all those who will come after to build on the progress made and drive further change. It inspires and mobilises others to advocate around a shared agenda of gender equality and social transformation and the undoing of patriarchy.

Feminist management[iii]

Contemporary feminist management places the above definition of feminist leadership at the centre of its work. It values open communication, transparent decision-making processes, consistency, collaboration, consultation, power-sharing, building positive relationships and mentoring. Feminist management seeks to problematise, make visible or even dismantle traditional 'power over' leadership structures, and often has a focus on enacting power differently and transparently, as well as ensuring a focus on empowerment of women. In an organisational context, feminist management includes balancing feminist practice with formalised legal and regulatory requirements and the strategic purpose of the organisation. It requires lateral thinking and the ability to navigate complex personal and interpersonal issues and experiences in line with the principles of feminist practice and in a way which reflects the context of the organisational situation. Feminist management also centres around the ability to balance individual and collective needs and demands with the broader work of the feminist movement, with a focus on the greater good for the greatest number. It requires the ability to conceptually and practically navigate the spaces where feminist principles do not wholly align with legislative or regulatory frameworks, and lead – with a high level of emotional intelligence, strategic nous and courage – people and cultures through a process to balance the two. Feminist management uniquely aims to support staff "to translate feminist theory into practice and critique how feminism interfaces with their work".

Feminist governance

Governance is the system through which organisations are directed, controlled, operated and held accountable. Feminist governance is primarily used where organisations or institutions are focused on addressing issues that are gendered or seen to be feminist. Feminist governance is a values-based form of governance which requires that the standard principles of good governance are understood and practised from a shared values base that is informed by feminist theory, a commitment to gender equality, an understanding of gendered hierarchies of power, and an awareness of the place of the organisation/institution in the wider feminist movement. Feminist governance bodies have a responsibility to make decisions in a way that balances the mission of the organisational against legal requirements, regulatory frameworks and feminist principles. Feminist governance places significant value on advocacy, activism, evidence, robust support structures, women's leadership and empowerment, effective and transparent communication and strong, honest relationships. It also recognises that whilst formal accountability is required to legislative frameworks, funders, staff and stakeholders, this should be considered alongside an obligation to situate the work within the goals of the broader feminist movement itself.

Whilst we have provided separate definitions for feminist leadership, management, and governance, during this research project participants primarily focused on the concept of feminist 'practice' by leaders as a whole, or feminist leadership as a broad term which encompassed feminist management and, at times, feminist governance. In the context of the FV and PVAW sectors and the specific work that the interview participants led in their organisations, we consider feminist management and governance to be specific sites/areas of feminist leadership. As such, this report will use the term 'feminist leadership' in an expansive way to reflect all aspects of feminist leadership (including those associated with management and governance). Where participants were referring specifically to feminist management or governance, this will be indicated.

Discussion of definitions

During the discussions on these working definitions and their use specifically within the family violence response and primary prevention sectors in Victoria, a number of key themes arose. In this section we provide a brief summary of the knowledge, insights, and concerns voiced by participants around each theme. For those that were also raised in the context of discussions about the enablers of feminist leadership, a more expansive discussion can be found in Section 4.

iii Whilst these working definitions were developed specifically in relation to family violence organisations, it is important to note that feminist management also occurs in other systems, structures and locations within the specialist FV and PVAW sectors such as advocacy groups.

Shared values and mission

Participants highlighted the importance of having a shared vision of social transformation, believing that progress was more likely to occur when they worked together, with support from their peers and the broader feminist movement, rather than individually.

"...with this sector there's such a clear, unifying vision that does go across all organisations, and all branches within it, so even though they fight like crazy within the sector, there is something that we all understand and all want to be different in the world... which at the end of the day means we all can work together and we... can share a common goal."

(GOVERNANCE AND POLICY SPECIALIST)

The overarching, long-term feminist goals of gender equality and the eradication of violence against women were perceived to provide an impetus for collaboration. "We're in this for... a strong kind of shared vision. I think that lends itself to kind of less formalised collaboration in many ways." (Senior manager, national organisation) Working with people who shared the same values and drive for social change was considered important as it provides a supportive environment which somewhat offsets the difficulties inherent in feminist work within the FV and PVAW sectors.

Collectivity

Collectivity was also considered a guiding principle of feminist leadership and essential to the realisation of feminist goals. It was raised on multiple occasions during interviews, frequently in reference to the role feminist activism has played in the establishment and development of the Victorian specialist FV and PVAW sectors. More traditionally understood as a model guiding the operation of feminist organisations, particularly in the FV space, participants indicated that a focus on collectivity in their contemporary practice was more closely tied to concepts of working together to achieve a collectively understood goal.

"The whole origins of... feminist leadership in Victoria, and the history and trajectory of it, has been... that women have seen a gap... there hasn't been services provided so they just decided to do it and I think that initiative... and that problem-solving is extraordinary."

(CHAIR, STATEWIDE SERVICE)

A significant proportion of staff across both sectors either 'grew up' within, or were mentored and supported by, those belonging to the original feminist refuge movement of the 1970s. Thus, collectivity was seen to be of both historical importance and contemporary value due to its capacity to provide 'strength in numbers' when advocating for social change and the implicit support and solidarity that comes from collective action in a difficult field of practice and reform.

"You can do lots of little things... collectively together, and that's the trick... doing things by yourself in a big organisation like that [hospital] doesn't work. You have to have a team, and you have to have the one thinking in a place like that."

(SENIOR STAFF MEMBER, WOMEN'S HEALTH ORGANISATION)

Additionally, collectivity was seen to play a key role in ensuring clear, consistent messaging to community, government, external stakeholders, and the media. There was a strong commitment to community education within the sectors, fuelled by their ongoing feminist mission to transform social norms and attitudes surrounding gender inequality and violence against women. Participants viewed collectivity as having played an instrumental role in raising the profile of family violence and violence against women to an issue of national concern.

"...look at the change we have made already... In terms of family violence and violence against women it's now a mainstream... issue where really, not long ago, it was just a women's issue and not a concern to anybody beyond that family. What a huge change there has been in terms of people's understanding."

(GOVERNANCE AND POLICY SPECIALIST)

By working collectively in pursuit of a better world, participants believed they were enhancing the feminist movement's chances of success.

Whilst there was general acceptance of the importance of collectivity to effective feminist leadership, some expressed concern over what they perceived to be the gradual erosion of this practice with the sectors.

"Leadership has become so individualised, confused with specialised... I do think there's an element of collectivism that's fallen off the... charts in terms of our approach to... prevention, or indeed, crisis response."

(FV AND CALD SPECIALIST)

Most believed that the success of individual leaders was ultimately dependent upon the support of the broader feminist movement and the work of the women who had walked the path before them.

The concept of shared, or collective power and the importance of feminist leadership ensuring that all voices are heard and considered were raised a number of times.

"...integrity and leadership, for me, means... reflecting a collective voice, as opposed to simply an individual one."

(FV AND CALD SPECIALIST)

This was important in terms of making sure that the voices of victim survivors of family violence were heard, as were the voices of those who worked in responding to or preventing family violence 'at the coalface' with communities and individuals, but also in terms of ensuring that the diversity of voices from those positions of influence, power, leadership or expertise were heard and respected. Participants also indicated that feminist leaders had a responsibility to provide opportunities for staff to develop and practice their own leadership skills as a way of 'growing the feminist collective'.

Ongoing critique of power structures

According to those interviewed, an awareness of existing power structures within organisations and situations, public acknowledgment of their existence, and active work to address these power imbalances is critical to feminist leadership.

"I think feminist organisations, in understanding power in the way that we do, are much more likely to neutralise it."

(SENIOR STAFF MEMBER, REGIONAL ORGANISATION)

There was an expectation within the sectors that leaders would visibly critique their own power, and that of their peers. This was perceived to be one of the core responsibilities of feminist leadership.

"I think you also have to make sure you're acknowledging that power imbalances exist. The work of a leader is to make sure you're trying acknowledge that... and see ways of working that make sure there's equity in the relationship, at least in terms of having open conversations and acknowledging the power dynamic."

(SENIOR LEADER, STATEWIDE FV ORGANISATION)

There was also a sense that the responsibility of a feminist leader was to ensure that an intersectional lens was embedded as part of this critique of power structures.

"I think it's really important to have within an organisation as well, an intersectional assessment of how that power is used, because power and privilege can be quite fluid in organisations and overlapping."

(GOVERNMENT LEADER)

Although this ongoing evaluation of power could be challenging on an individual level, participants believed it plays an important role in ensuring feminist values and principles are followed.

"There are people who are constantly critiquing power structures and critiquing whose voices are at the centre in these conversations. To some people that feels frustrating and a bit divisive, but it's actually the result of a quality that is part of feminist leadership which is that constant critique of power."

(SENIOR MANAGER, NATIONAL ORGANISATION)

The importance of embedding an intersectional lens

The inextricably linked nature of feminism and intersectionality was raised by a number of participants in the discussion on the definition of feminist leadership. Given both the diversity of the research participants, and the strong and important focus on intersectionality in the family violence and violence against women sectors in Victoria today, it was not surprising that there was a sense amongst participants that

"feminism these days really does try to embrace intersectionality and diversity, which you captured in those definitions.

(CEO, STATEWIDE ORGANISATION)

However, the importance of a shared understanding both of the roots of an intersectional framework and of feminism was seen as critical to the success of the work.

" Intersectional feminism, it does come from a feminist framework. But I think when people do sometimes hear feminism, they think automatically that it is exclusive rather than inclusive or is trying to understand a range or a myriad of intersecting power structures. So, I still think there's work to do...to get people really across what intersectional feminism means, and that it is about a number of lenses, it's not one lens at the exclusivity of all other lenses."

(SENIOR LEADER, STATEWIDE FV ORGANISATION)

Participants also recognised the inherent diversity within the feminist movement and as a result of this, recognised the importance of an intersectional approach being embedded within their approach to feminist leadership.

"There's an assumption that if you're a white able-bodied feminist from a relatively middle-class background then you're going to be addressing everybody's needs necessarily and be inclusive and so on, but that's not actually the case... having that intersectional approach is really important."

(GOVERNMENT LEADER)

For other participants however, the concept of an integrated approach required further thought and discussion within the family violence and violence against women movements in Victoria if they were to successfully build and achieve shared aims as a movement.

"I think using terms like intersectional feminism is a misnomer. Rather, adopting an intersectional framework to feminism has served to highlight that any movement that seeks to theorise lived experience from an exclusive or privileged point of view, is in essence a failed movement. Adopting an intersectional framework is ultimately about recognising power within and the need for feminisms/feminists to be self-reflective and acknowledge how their/our particular and specific social positioning impacts and influences our priorities. Once we acknowledge that experiences of oppression are not the same for all women, once we disrupt this idea that it is only gender that demands our attention, and we genuinely commit to listening to voices informed by centuries of erasure and struggle, then we can get back to the concept of coalition politics and the real work of bringing down the patriarchy."

(FV AND CALD SPECIALIST)

Accountability and transparency

Accountability and transparency were considered integral to effective feminist leadership within the sectors, with participants identifying a range of different areas of accountability. These included accountability to the organisation, to their staff, to victim-survivors, and to the broader feminist movement.

For some, accountability to the organisation and its mission was a critical component of their leadership.

"The CEO and the senior management are fundamentally there to deliver the purpose of the organisation. Organisations don't exist for the convenience of the staff. Organisations exist to create change or deliver services."

(GOVERNANCE AND POLICY SPECIALIST)

Complying with legislation and regulations, adopting transparent decision-making processes, and ensuring clear communication with staff were all seen to support such accountability.

There was general agreement that feminist leadership – particularly in an organisational context – sometimes requires unpopular decisions to be made in the strategic interests of the organisation and the feminist work the organisation leads. In such circumstances, transparency around the process and rationale of the decisions was seen to be critical.

"If I'm tabling something that I know is difficult for my team and they do want to ask follow-up questions on what the rationale was, or how we came to that decision, or what were the things that were involved in the thinking, I'm really happy to have that conversation. It doesn't mean they have to like the decision at the end, but I'm still happy to provide the further detail around why it's been reached and how we got there."

(SENIOR STAFF MEMBER, STATEWIDE ORGANISATION)

Interview participants indicated that although they believed some decisions that they made would be unpopular with staff, they maintained the sense that it was possible to make difficult decisions in a feminist way that would ultimately lead to feminist outcomes for the organisation and its work.

"The outcome that you are trying to achieve is your feminist aim. The feminism is embodied in what you are delivering and the change you are making in the world. And then, other practices are really about being fair and open and honest." (Governance and policy specialist) Whilst some participants acknowledged that such challenges to their leadership could be confronting on a personal level, most were pragmatic about the fact that they would not please everyone all the time. "Sometimes people just don't like where you've gotten to, and I don't think that makes you less of a feminist manager, or your feminist management less effective or important."

(CHAIR, STATEWIDE SERVICE)

Others identified accountability to victim survivors as an important principle of feminist leadership within the sectors given the specific context of the work in preventing and responding to family violence and violence against women.

"I think it's also about... placing those people who are most discriminated or disadvantaged or most affected by the problem you're trying to deal with at the centre of that approach and having that accountability to survivors central to what you're trying to do."

(CEO, GLOBAL VAW ORGANISATION)

Accountability to the broader feminist movement was an important feature of some participant's leadership practice.

"I love that idea of accountability to the broader feminist movement. I think that's, again, sort of coming back to that solidarity. I think that's really powerful and fundamental"

(SENIOR STAFF MEMBER, REGIONAL ORGANISATION).

Others were uncomfortable with such a framing, feeling it to be less applicable within organisations that do not explicitly identify as feminist, which is increasingly common as a result of Victoria's approach to mainstreaming family violence prevention and response work.

"I'm not sure if we would think of ourselves and our place in the wider feminist movement. I think individually, we might, but I don't know that we would collectively."

(CHAIR, REGIONAL ORGANISATION)

Collaboration and partnerships

Collaboration was consistently viewed as a mechanism for building positive relationships and partnerships across the sectors, supporting those in leadership to successfully navigate complex issues and situations, and achieve positive feminist outcomes in their prevention and response work. The enabling role that collaboration and partnerships can play is further discussed in *Partnerships and collaboration* in Section 4.

Openness to change and growth

An openness to change and growth was seen as another defining feature of feminist leadership. For some this was closely tied to the practice of self-reflection, whereas for others it involved being prepared to sit in the discomfort of having their leadership challenged.

"I think knowing what principles or values might be informing you, but being open to other ideas, and being open to creating space to hear those ideas, being not just open to feedback but actually really grappling with what it means to draw feedback and to act on it."

(SENIOR LEADER, SEXUAL ASSAULT SERVICE)

One participant spoke of how such openness was at odds with more common leadership approaches in Australia.

"...the culture of leadership is such that it's very difficult to fail and I don't think that, generally speaking, we have in Australia a culture which allows leaders to say that they've changed their mind, to say that they did something wrong and now they can see that.... We don't have that role modelled very much."

(SENIOR MANAGER, NATIONAL ORGANISATION)

It was believed that a culture supportive of feminist leadership would understand and acknowledge the educational value of failure as a process, which would in turn allow greater opportunity for individual growth and evolution.

Most participants viewed feminist leadership as an ongoing process of learning and transformation rather than a fixed or static practice.

The problem with definitions

The greatest challenge in attempting to define feminist leadership is that each individual's leadership practice is informed by their own unique "histories, experiences and personalities". Further, given the diversity of participants interviewed (in terms of a range of demographic factors, life experiences and professional backgrounds), we would anticipate that individual participants would have also been influenced by different waves of feminism and different feminist theories. Collectively, these histories, experiences and personalities act to define how feminist leadership and feminism is both practiced and conceptually understood within the sectors and will have therefore influenced the responses to interview questions and the particular issues that were raised. As one participant observed,

"it's not always going to be the same for everyone, I think, which is a hard thing, because... we want definitions to be exacting but... I think the nature of feminism is that it's doesn't always look the same for everyone."

(CEO, GLOBAL VAW ORGANISATION).

Multiple participants indicated that whilst feminist leadership practices are prevalent across the prevention and response sectors, the lack of a universally accepted model of feminist leadership increases the challenge of reflective practice and collective visioning. Many believed having a set of working definitions would help to focus discussion and reflection within the sectors, encouraging more intentional approaches to their practice.

> "I think your working definitions, being able to... circulate that in written form, being able to start to have conversations... I'm sure these conversations are being held but being able to have these kind of conversations around examining..., if you use me as an example, examining my kind of leadership approach, or my management style. You know, how feminists is it? Thinking about those definitions and taking the time to think about that, getting feedback around from other people around their observations, their experience of my management and leadership."
>
> **(SENIOR LEADER, REGIONAL ORGANISATION)**

The working definitions presented at the start of this section represent a starting point rather than an end. The merit of definitions in and of themselves has been debated both within the interviews and the Action Research Group. Most interview participants believed a set of working definitions would be beneficial to the sectors.

> "I think they'd be incredibly useful. I think they'd be grounding and will really help people stay focused, because these are all values-based things and I think that it really speaks to the culture that we're wanting to create and exist within... I think they're incredibly important."
>
> **(SENIOR STAFF MEMBER, REGIONAL ORGANISATION)**

It is important to note, however, that some participants raised concerns that definitions can be overly prescriptive and misused at times which is why these definitions have been framed as working definitions that are continually in development.

Our working definitions have been developed to assist those within the sectors to be more intentional in the ways they think about and enact feminist leadership, and to consider the inherent differences between feminist leadership within a FV and PVAW context and other forms of leadership. We anticipate that they will evolve over time as feminist practice continues to develop and will be strengthened by future research in the area.

Section 2

How are feminist leadership and management different from other types of leadership and management?

When participants were asked to explain the differences between feminist leadership, feminist management, and feminist governance and what they thought would be a common, more mainstream understanding of effective leadership, management and governance they generally began by suggesting that 'good leadership' and 'feminist leadership' are synonymous with each other.

There was a view that feminist leadership sets itself apart because of the importance of context. Most participants viewed their leadership work as contributing to an historical trajectory towards social change. However, social progress tends to be slow and incremental, and difficult to quantify by standard measures of economic and political success. Participants spoke of the challenge of justifying their work within a capitalist system, where the sorts of changes they are ultimately seeking are not necessarily valued by the system itself as the true measures of its success and do not match the outcomes they are being measured against.

As we investigated further in the interviews, we found particular nuances that differentiated feminist leadership from other forms of leadership. These differences included: the purpose of the work; a modelling of the change being sought in the world; an intentional focus on power; the *how* being as important as the *what;* an intentional focus on collaboration and networking; a unique workforce composition; and the valuing of process as well as outcome. All of these differences between more traditional or standard leadership and feminist leadership are discussed in more detail below.

Purpose of the work – systemic and social change

Participants generally agreed that feminist leadership is driven by the collective goal of transforming our society by seeking to dismantle systems of oppression and marginalisation and create new social systems and structures that are equitable, gender-aware, inclusive and diverse.

> "We live in a patriarchal world so therefore you're questioning the fundamentals of our society in your work... you're confronting and dealing with... things that aren't even on other people's radar and don't register with them... I think that makes it quite unique."
>
> **(GOVERNANCE AND POLICY SPECIALIST)**

Modelling the change you want to see in the world as you do the work

Feminist leadership was seen to be distinct from other forms of leadership because it actively models the change it is seeking in the world;

"...we're working towards a collective end goal, be it gender equality and the prevention of violence against women. That's a massive, audacious goal that we all need to work collectively to achieve. In doing this work, we are trying to model how we can go about it as a society."

(SENIOR LEADER, STATEWIDE PVAW ORGANISATION)

Whilst this is a feature of leadership practice within other social movements, the requirement to model things like gender equality, women's empowerment and other feminist principles in particular was seen as a specific differentiator of feminist leadership in the FV and PVAW sectors. Those interviewed felt that by ensuring gender equity and non-discriminatory practices within their own organisations, they were laying the foundations for broader feminist societal change.

"We have to be trying to live the goal every single day, in the way that we manage, in the way that we lead. And I think that's probably the difference, kind of trying to role model what this broader change we're seeking would look like wherever we can."

(SENIOR MANAGER, NATIONAL ORGANISATION)

By role modelling an alternative to more traditional leadership models, many interview participants perceived themselves as playing an educative role in long-term social transformation, as well as actively contributing to the change required by living it in practice.

"I don't think you can have good leadership that isn't feminist leadership."

(ACADEMIC-PRACTITIONER FV & LGBTIQ)

Intentional focus on power

Another area participants identified as setting feminist leadership practices apart from other leadership approaches was an intentional and ongoing critique of power structures. Participants spoke of the importance of using the language of power to make power structures visible within their organisations in a constructive way.

"I think from a feminist perspective, it's really important to think about how power is used in organisations, because we're talking about power in relationships and in society, and how... we make the practice of using power in organisations visible, and legitimate and accountable at different levels."

(GOVERNMENT LEADER)

The *how* is as important as the *what*

Participants also spoke of the importance of process in feminist leadership practice, arguing that the way leaders operate matters as much as the outcomes they achieve;

"...to do this work genuinely, like to live up to our actual ideals and values, I feel like we need to... acknowledge that the way we act, the processes we go through, matter as much as this final thing that we're trying to achieve... this final... grand vision of equality."

(CEO, GLOBAL VAW ORGANISATION)

Whilst outcomes were considered important, it was seen as crucial that feminist values and principles informed the path to their achievement. There was a sense that this could be a difficult ideal to live up to at times, given the pressures organisations are currently facing regarding time, demand and funding.

One participant used the example of conducting research into violence against women to illustrate the value of feminist process – for example, a commitment to capability building, to expanding the sphere of influence and not having expertise held by a small number of people – in the context of broader feminist goals.

"I've seen this happen a million times, where you do research on violence against women in a... careful, safe, ethical, empowered way, and the process of the research itself is as transformative as the findings, if not more so. You train 100 researchers who become the biggest advocates, I've seen whole countries basically built off of a national study because all of those 100 researchers who were trained basically became... the activists of the next generation. And that wasn't about the outcome of the study, it was just that the process itself transformed a large group of people and generated... long-term change."

(CEO, GLOBAL VAW ORGANISATION)

The process of feminist leadership was not just viewed as a means to an end, it was seen to have intrinsic value within itself for the achievement of feminist goals.

Collaboration and networking

Collaboration was reported to be deeply embedded in feminist practice within the sectors and considered an intrinsic part of good leadership. The building of networks, both formal and informal, play a key role in advocacy work by providing strength in numbers. Such networks were also perceived to improve the quality of work by bringing together people with expertise in diverse areas and providing opportunities for those without formal leadership roles to exert influence. The issue of collaboration and partnerships is further discussed in *Partnerships and collaboration* in Section 4.The impact of workforce composition on leadership practices

The specialist FV and PVAW workforces have a number of distinctive characteristics that leadership practices within the field must take into consideration. The workforces are highly feminised and most staff have lived experience of some sort; whether that is of family violence, sexual harassment or assault in their own lives or within their family or peer group, or experiences of discrimination or inequality based on their gender, ability, race, sexual orientation or a range of other factors.

The fact that so many staff have personal experience of the violence, harassment or inequality they are trying to address was seen by interview participants as adding value to the work, but there was also recognition of the complexity that came with the fact that a significant proportion of the workforce had lived experience in some shape or form and the impact that had on the ways in which feminist leaders practiced. Some spoke of the power of lived experience as a motivating force behind the feminist work undertaken by the sectors;

> "I do think that is a really powerful and sustaining kind of thing beyond the intellect of the work, is that it is personal for all of us."
>
> **(CHAIR, STATEWIDE SERVICE)**

In this way, lived experience was perceived to fuel the passion and drive many in the sector bring to their work.

Another participant described the impact that trauma has on work within the prevention and response sectors, explaining that many of those working in the space come to it whilst they are holding or still processing past or current experiences of trauma. This can have a profound impact upon an individual's work within the space, but also has implications for feminist leaders who are required to hold a level of expertise around the ways in which trauma will impact on things like cognitive processing, productivity, behaviours and relationship development and organisational culture.

> "...a lot of us are in this space because we've come from trauma, traumatic experiences. ...unless you've dealt with it, unless you've like, done the work to properly kind of, you know, process that stuff, that comes out in lots of unconscious ways. Whether that's like, in the form of...insecurity and ego, bullying, or imposter syndrome... however it manifests. ...That's hard for doing good work, like good feminist work...people can't live up to their, what they think in their head, their ideas of what they are, or in their head, when they're, they're actually living from a place of quite a lot of pain and anxiety"
>
> **(CEO, GLOBAL VAW ORGANISATION)**

Another obvious feature of the work in the family violence response sector (and to a lesser degree in the primary prevention sector) is that the nature of work itself can result in vicarious trauma. In part this vicarious trauma can result from constantly managing systemic barriers or dealing with victim survivors who have experienced serious and significant harm, but it can also come from the violence that is ever-present in society; a number of participants spoke about the fact that they are working to end violence against women (and other forms of family violence) in a context where one woman is killed every week. These factors, and the way they interact with the existing trauma that many in the workforce carry, were seen as features that were specific to the prevention and response workforce, and which posed real and unique challenges for leaders in terms of how they had to operate and the additional complexities they had to consider at every moment as they did their work.

Section 3

The wider social context within which feminist leadership is practiced

The wider context that the work occurs within was frequently mentioned by interview participants as an important element in understanding why the efforts of feminist leaders to achieve significant and sustained change is not always achieved. Whilst there was an exceptionally strong commitment to feminist values and principles amongst those interviewed, the complex interplay of patriarchy, colonialism, capitalism, and racism (in particular, along with ableism, ageism and hetero and cis normativity) underpinning our society was seen to consistently stymie feminist leadership, and the practice of intersectional feminist leadership in particular. There was a sense from many participants that these global political, social and economic systems have very real implications for systemic reform within the family violence context, with one participant suggesting that "we're operating within a system where there's little understanding or commitment to the sorts of things that we think are important... we're working in a hostile environment predominately." (Chair, regional organisation)

The capitalist system produces unique challenges around the securing of state and federal funding, and the navigation of competitive funding mechanisms. Working within a sector which relies heavily on government funding and, like all other sectors and institutions in Australia, sits within "systems of patriarchal capitalism" (Academic-practitioner FV & LGBTIQ), was seen to created tensions around "how to be feminist enough" (Academic-practitioner FV & LGBTIQ). Participants felt that appearing too feminist (either as individual leaders or for the organisations they led being perceived this way) could make them unpalatable to government and result in reduced or lost funding or influence.

Working within the system of patriarchy was seen to impact on perceptions of what good leadership should look like and inform community views on family violence. "The challenges of working to prevent violence against women, understanding that the key driver is gender equality and particular expressions of gender equality, is that we are really working up against generations if not centuries of patriarchy essentially, and people are very comfortable in that, there are certainly people who don't want to let go of that way of being." (CEO, national organisation)

Similarly, the impacts of colonialism and racism were reported to have a negative impact on diversity and inclusion within the sectors. One Aboriginal participant spoke of the way patriarchy and colonialism have together shaped organisational structures within many Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs).

> "...the way that we set up our ACCOs... they're constructed very much on a white model of doing work."
>
> **(SENIOR LEADER, REGIONAL ORGANISATION)**

Participants suggested that attempting to transform these existing systems of disadvantage and oppression whilst simultaneously operating within them inevitably involves a certain level of compromise and pragmatism.

> "I think there's a bit of a rub there because we are having to play the game. We don't interact with others who (are) also feminist leaders, we interact with others in a big, broader world. And so, I think sometimes we have to make decisions, not that necessarily aren't feminist, that aren't influenced by our own feminist values, but that are strategic. And sometimes the strategy might override [some of] the values in certain instances."
>
> **(SENIOR MANAGER, NATIONAL ORGANISATION)**

This issue of strategic pragmatism was raised on multiple occasions and there was a sense that while there were certain areas where feminist leaders would compromise, there were also some fundamental feminist values and principles that could not be shifted or changed. One of the challenges identified by feminist leaders working within such systems is determining where the line between the two lies.

Section 4

What enables feminist leadership, management, and governance within the specialist family violence and primary prevention sectors in Victoria?

Whilst all participants agreed that feminist leadership plays a critical role in enabling the work of the Victorian specialist FV and PVAW sectors, they also indicated that their feminist leadership occurs in the face of a range of barriers. Some of these are structural and systemic barriers that are not within the control of the individual feminist leaders, whilst others are things that – collectively and individually – feminist leaders could influence or address.

The barriers to effective and impactful feminist leadership most commonly identified by interview participants include: insecure and insufficient funding; fear of reprisal for being 'too feminist'; service demand pressures; time constraints; the lack of a shared understanding about the best path to achieving feminist goals; and the difficulties posed by working within the systems of oppression that were discussed in the earlier section.

These barriers were raised in the context of discussions focused on what interview participants believe enables feminist leadership in the PVAW and FV sectors in Victoria. All of the interview participants enthusiastically offered solutions and considerations that would support a change in the way that feminist leadership was practiced, valued and understood as a way of increasing its impact *on* the work, and therefore increasing the impact of the *work itself*. It emerged very strongly in these discussions that the enablers for feminist leadership within the sectors are interdependent and need to be addressed as such in order to successfully achieve all of the outcomes of the Royal Commission reforms, enable prevention work to be sustained in the long-term, and ensure that victim/survivors receive appropriate levels of support when and where it is needed. As such, we have focused this section on articulating the things that participants suggested would have the most significant impacts on enabling effective, impactful and sustainable feminist leadership within the Victorian PVAW and FV response sectors.

Clarity of vision and purpose that are supported by shared frameworks

Whilst the primary prevention and family violence response sectors are unified by a shared, long-term vision of an equal world free from violence, there appears to be less cohesion around how such a goal should be achieved both within and across the two sectors.

> "I don't think... we've articulated what we're trying to do in this space, and we have a... shared understanding of what it means."
>
> **(CHAIR, REGIONAL ORGANISATION)**

In the current context in Victoria, this was largely attributed to the reform context and the processes through which these reforms are being designed and implemented, rapid growth of the sectors which has led to increased competition for resources and a tendency for leaders to focus more on organisational growth, capability and positioning and potentially less on targeted, collective work towards the shared feminist goal of social transformation. For some, this shift for feminist

leaders to be more organisationally focused was believed to be diluting the capacity of organisations to work effectively together.

A deliberate and explicit articulation of the underpinnings of feminist work practices was believed to be critical to good feminist leadership, as was the ability to be explicit about the causes of the problem and who is using violence.

> "I think that when we are clear... when there is permission to clearly describe patriarchal behaviour and the patriarchal drive to power and patriarchal culture, like I feel like that permission is very important."
>
> **(SENIOR LEADER, LGBTIQ ORGANISATION)**

This was also seen as a way to forge a stronger connection between the more traditional work to end violence against women and the newer work (which has, given its newness, a less robust evidence base informing it) to end other forms of family violence.

Participants also indicated that working from a shared feminist values base was critical for effective conflict resolution, particularly within partnerships, consortiums and governance structures, but that the feminist principles underpinning the conceptual frameworks for such alliances were not always clearly articulated.

> "When we establish these governance structures... I don't think we actually go, 'Right, well, if it gets really hard, and we can't make a decision, then what do we do?... I think then there's that unique opportunity to go, well... we want to make use of feminist governance structure, and it looks like this..."
>
> **(SENIOR LEADER, REGIONAL ORGANISATION)**

This too was seen as a roadblock to effective feminist leadership.

Participants reported that adequate time and resources were instrumental to achieving this clarity of purpose and vision and to the development and sustained use of shared feminist frameworks. Boards and management teams require the capacity to hold strategic conversations about purpose, focus, and long-term change. In an environment where demand pressures are intense, particularly in the context of once in a generation reform as is happening in Victoria, such conversations are often side-lined in favour of dealing with more immediate issues.

> "...you can easily get wound up in the day to day, and operations... and you can forget why you are there and the difference you are trying to make and what's important."
>
> **(GOVERNANCE AND POLICY SPECIALIST)**

A commitment to a long term, embedded approach to intersectionality as part of a feminist framework

There was strong recognition that an intersectional approach to both feminist leadership and other practice within the family violence sector was critical to effective and inclusive service delivery and prevention activity. Participants also recognised that issues of diversity and inclusion, as well as addressing racism and other systemic forms of privilege and oppression, was work that was needed both within and outside of the specialist family violence and prevention sectors in Victoria. Whilst most participants felt that there are strong policy frameworks such as *Everybody Matters* to support the embedding of intersectionality into the core business of services, achieving this requires significant and focused time, effort and resources which can be complex to manage within workforces who are already struggling to manage demand. Many participants indicated that their efforts to embed intersectionality in core business and everyday practice to achieve true and sustained change is made complex by workload issues.

> "Actually, the issues of white privilege and white superiority are prevalent in all organisations, not just feminist organisations. So, I think everyone, everywhere is grappling to look at how do we challenge these systems? How do we decolonise the frameworks that have been established, when we're just drowning in service delivery as well? I think that many of the family violence services are struggling with how to support staff from diverse backgrounds, and to reconfigure their frameworks to be inclusive. I think it is a struggle, and ...I see the disconnect, it's like people putting out these glossy things that have frameworks and language of intersectionality, but actually, it's not embedded in the organisations. And I think sometimes organisations need to slow down and bring along the whole organisation."
>
> **(SENIOR LEADER, SEXUAL ASSAULT SERVICE)**

This sense that intersectional feminist leadership and intersectional feminist practice in specialist family violence and primarily prevention agencies required time, dedicated effort, expertise and patience was noted by many participants in discussions about how important it was to do this work in a way that will result in meaningful systemic, structural and practice change. Further, there was a sense that currently, achieving this relies on the passion and dedication of those within the sector to drive it. Whilst there was a strong commitment to ensuring intersectional practice was embedded as part of their leadership and the work of the organisations, for those in leadership roles, carving out the time to do such work remains an ongoing challenge.

> "I think what that has meant for me as a leader, and I think for some of the other intersectional leaders maybe as well, has been that you have conversations with government about if you're going to do intersectionality in this space, then actually you need to give us the time and the money to do it properly. And that means not creating really hairy deadlines for us because that doesn't work."
>
> **(CEO, STATEWIDE ORGANISATION)**

Understanding and valuing of feminist work and expertise

Improved knowledge and understanding of feminist theory, conceptual frameworks and practice amongst stakeholders, partners, boards and other governance mechanisms, was identified to be a key enabler of feminist leadership. Without this knowledge, it can be challenging for feminist leaders to find support for their ways of working and their broader goals. It was seen as vitally important

> "that the people around the table are feminists and understand the way the sector fits within a feminist framework."
>
> **(GOVERNANCE AND POLICY SPECIALIST)**

This was particularly relevant when it came to organisational leadership and governance mechanisms for agencies who were doing feminist work like preventing and responding to family violence and violence against women. Additionally, feminist leadership practices were seen to have higher chances of success when those outside the sector were open to applying feminist principles within their own work.

> "I think there needs to be an openness... to not knowing and not being driven by being right... it's basically about sometimes saying, 'I don't know and let's collectively try and work it out."
>
> **(CEO, GLOBAL VAW ORGANISATION)**

Feminist ways of working and feminist leadership practices being valued by those outside the specialist sectors was seen as critical to the safety of victim survivors of family violence, to the structures of the family violence response system, and to the design and implementation of violence prevention work, and as an important enabler for feminist leadership *within* the specialist PVAW and response sectors. There was a strong sense that effective feminist leadership requires an environment that appreciates feminist ways of working.

> "If there is not an alignment of values within the system to the individual, or to the people trying to lead in a certain way, then that makes it extremely challenging."
>
> **(CEO, GLOBAL VAW ORGANISATION)**

Participants also identified the importance of governments who are leading reform or the development of plans and strategies around violence against women and family violence valuing feminist knowledge and expertise. Several participants suggested improvements to government consultation processes, calling for "a more sophisticated understanding of how you actually get work done by targeting who needs to be involved, when, and how" (Chair, regional organisation). There was a perception that current processes could be counter-productive at times and reflected a lack of trust in the sector's feminist expertise in preventing and responding to family violence and violence against women.

> "We don't need to be doing the next national plan via public survey. We need to be doing it with the experts that know the evidence base and know how this work is done best."
>
> **(SENIOR LEADER, STATEWIDE PVAW ORGANISATION)**

Participants indicated that when feminist knowledge and expertise was appropriately valued and trusted by government, it served to strengthen feminist leadership within the sectors by, for example, enabling organisations to improve service provision and to proactively focus on capability building. Enhanced information sharing between the specialist FV and PVAW sectors was also cited as an enabler of more effective feminist leadership, with one participant recommending "a better dialogue about how both are essential" (Academic-practitioner FV & LGBTIQ) and an improved understanding of each sector's skill sets and expertise, both within the sectors and externally.

> "I think there's some work to do there as well, to bring those two sectors together, or bring that continuum of prevention and response together as well."
>
> **(SENIOR STAFF MEMBER, STATEWIDE ORGANISATION)**

Adequate funding that enables certainty and sustainability

Despite significant increases in funding to both the specialist FV and PVAW sectors as a result of the Royal Commission reforms, demand for services continues to outstrip the sectors' capacity to respond. Participants reported that sustainable, long-term funding would increase stability within the sector, reduce staffing churn, provide greater opportunity for career mentoring, leadership training and succession planning, and enable more effective practice in both prevention and response. It would also enable those in leadership positions to take a more strategic and reflective approach to long-term goals such as gender equality and reducing the longer-term prevalence of violence against women and family violence.

Current funding structures act as a barrier to feminist leadership in multiple ways. Firstly, much of the sectors' funding is short-term in nature, making it difficult for those in leadership positions to maintain continuity within their staff teams, to retain highly qualified staff, to build stronger and more robust internal organisational systems, or build internal leadership pathways (amongst many other things).

> "You've got one-year funding cycles and you're supporting staff that are on 12-month contracts. It's incredibly difficult to retain good staff and develop teams, this is the second new team that I've created in a few years."
>
> **(SENIOR LEADER, STATEWIDE PVAW ORGANISATION)**

Short-term funding cycles also leave organisations with insufficient time to complete necessary activities that are required to deliver projects (but that are not focused on project deliverables themselves), such as recruiting and appropriately onboarding staff, undertaking project planning, and connecting with stakeholders in a way that aligns with feminist values and principles, at the same time as meeting project deadlines.

> "... we end up starting a project two months after the first deliverable is even due because that's just how it rolls with government. And then how on earth do you enact all of that list of [feminist] values when you've just got to get it done?"
>
> **(SENIOR MANAGER, NATIONAL ORGANISATION)**

Additionally, competitive funding arrangements were reported to impact negatively on small organisations within the sector in particular, hindering their capacity to engage in large scale work because larger organisations frequently secure the bulk of the available funding through competitive processes. This can jeopardise their survival and narrow the skills-base, having a detrimental effect on diversity within the sectors.

> "And it also means that smaller organisations, community centric organisations whether that's in different multilingual communities or whoever are left by the wayside, and we don't get that expertise amplified and brought into the broader system."
>
> **(ACADEMIC-PRACTITIONER FV & LGBTIQ)**

Finally, funding uncertainty and an over-reliance on project/program-based funding impacts upon the sector's capacity to lead social change and systemic transformation. When organisations are struggling to survive due to insufficient core funding, they may become reluctant to advocate for change out of fear of losing the funding they do have, or not being in a position to receive additional funding in the future. Given the global evidence about the positive impact of autonomous feminist movements and civil society organisations across a range of social issues including violence against women, women's economic rights, access to childcare, inheritance and land rights, reproductive rights and women's political representation, any structures or systems inadvertently reducing the autonomy, freedom or willingness of these feminist agencies and leaders to advocate for change is a critical barrier to progress.

Secure, recurrent funding which enables organisations to meet demand, support staff retention and capability, enable long term impacts and support systemic prevention activity was seen as a critical enabler of feminist leadership within the prevention and response sectors. However, participants acknowledged that this was a difficult issue for government in light of how much funding has recently been injected into these two sectors as a result of the Royal Commission reforms. However, participants were clear that feminist leadership requires certain principles and practices to be met in particular ways for it to successfully achieve the outcomes of the work and meet the expectations of staff and stakeholders in the field. As such, they were equally clear that an enabler of their critical feminist leadership is adequate resourcing that offers certainty to enable a longer-term focus on the outcomes and goals of the work, and to ensure the sustainability of organisations which research shows are critical to wider social and systemic change.

Focus on longer term goals and impacts

The importance of identifying, measuring, reporting on, and being held to account for longer term goals and impacts, rather than short term outputs and outcomes was frequently raised as something which would enable more effective feminist leadership.

> "Everything is so short, and we're under so much pressure to do things that sometime that impacts the way that we work."
>
> **(ACADEMIC-PRACTITIONER FV & LGBTIQ)**

Whilst participants were interested in the impact and outcomes of their work, and were strongly supportive of being accountable for the outcomes of the funding they received, they were equally as interested in measuring their success against long-term goals of social transformation rather than a singular focus on short-term, program-based outputs and outcomes.

> "I do think the big barrier in government is this... outcome measurement focus... whether that's the funding timeframes, or the government will impose timeframes where you're trying to deliver a result."
>
> **(CEO, GLOBAL VAW ORGANISATION)**

This was seen to be problematic because social and systemic transformation (as is the focus of any family violence/violence against women work, particularly in the context of significant systemic reform) occurs too slowly and incrementally to be measured in one-to-three-year program timeframes, or against programmatic indicators that don't speak to the wider systemic and social impacts of the work that feminist leaders and their organisations undertake.

A clear evidence base and the use of gendered language

A number of interview participants spoke about the importance of a clear evidence base and the appropriate use of language for their work as feminist leaders. This issue arose in two different contexts. The first issue that was raised a number of times was through discussions about the evidence focused on men's violence against women (predominantly intimate partner violence and non-partner sexual violence) being used as evidence to address broader forms of family violence.

> "...the high-risk factors under MARAM, I know that those high-risk factors are specific to female victims...[but] when we're talking about victims survivors under MARAM, we're talking about elder abuse, young people using violence, we're talking about, you know, children, male victims, and I just, it just doesn't work."
>
> **(SENIOR STAFF MEMBER, REGIONAL ORGANISATION)**

Some participants expressed concern that this lack of clarity about the evidence for particular forms of family violence (given this is now the accepted terminology for work within the specialist sector, rather than the focus on men's violence against women which is primarily the issue the sector was originally created to address) would serve to undermine the decades of work experts in the field have spent helping to build the evidence base around the gendered nature of men's violence against women in particular.

Directly connected to the need to develop a clear evidence base to address the range of different forms of family violence, and the unique and specific dynamics associated with these forms (that are often different to the dynamics of men's intimate partner violence against women), some participants raised concerns about the de-gendering of language. Those we interviewed ranged from professionals who had been working in prevention or response for over three decades, to those who were newer to the profession and had only been a part of the sector for less than five years, and many spoke of their concerns about the impact de-gendering language would have.

> "I refuse to stop talking about violence against women, and I include trans women in that. As I keep on saying, women died in prison as a consequence of being forced fed.... or threw themselves under horses to progress the status of women.... and for decades we strove to assemble evidence of the gendered nature of family violence and sexual assault. I'm not likely to lose that ground anytime soon."
>
> **(PVAW AND VAW SPECIALIST)**

Whilst all participants were highly supportive of ensuring their work was inclusive and addressed a range of different forms of violence that were experienced by people in a family context, some were deeply troubled that the shift in language, theoretically designed to increase inclusiveness within policy and practice frameworks was obfuscating the many decades of work undertaken by feminists in building the evidence base around the gendered nature of violence against women, and men's use of this violence in particular.

There was a sense amongst many of the participants that the impact of successive reforms, alongside strategic advocacy for the use of de-gendered language (as opposed to the appropriate use of gendered and de-gendered language, depending on context) that came from a number of different quarters would have stark implications for the work of feminist leaders, the prevention and response sectors, and the visibility of an issue that primarily impacted on women and children. A number of participant's also raised the issue of risks to women's and other victim survivor's safety that could arise through potential shifts to the theoretical frameworks and funding that were likely to result from the de-gendering of language and an unclear evidence base.

Effective workforce planning and demand modelling

Ongoing demand pressures create a challenging environment for feminist leadership practice across both prevention and response sectors. Whilst partially due to the funding issues previously discussed, these pressures are also created by other factors such as workforce demand outstripping workforce supply and adequate training, staffing profiles within organisations, new ways of working required as a result of the reforms, and shifts to organisational policy, practice and process related to the professionalisation of the field. Rather than allowing staff to bear the brunt of such pressures, a feminist leadership approach seeks to work collaboratively with staff to navigate the challenges collectively which is complex in the current context given the high levels of staff 'churn', staff who hold unsustainably high workloads and a large number of staff who are relatively new to the field. Together, these challenges require feminist leaders to hold a high degree of staff anxiety and frustration, to carry an often higher-than-necessary funding or reputational risk and manage very frequent changes to the workforce and the practice required of them.

Participants reported challenges around staff recruitment, explaining that the rapid growth of the sectors and increased demand for services have made it increasingly difficult to secure trained staff, particularly in specialised areas. This is also a problem at leadership and senior management levels, with participants indicating that more resourcing for training to increase the number of skilled and experienced leaders and managers would be beneficial. "...you need people within organisations who have the skills to help drive things. And I don't think that there's enough resourcing around that. So then really important things get left to the side because they're trumped by...

> "All right, direct service provision needs to happen now."
>
> **(SENIOR LEADER, SEXUAL ASSAULT SERVICE)**

At the governance level, participants indicated that it could be difficult to find board members who understood and valued feminist ways of working at the same time as fitting the appropriate skills profile.

> "I think getting together a board that has the balance of... technical, mainstream skills and... feminism can be tricky."
>
> **(CHAIR, STATEWIDE SERVICE)**

This issue is exacerbated by the fact that most board positions within the sector are unpaid. "everybody's... operating in a voluntary capacity and gives enormously... and it feels like it is just more women's work, you know? (Chair, statewide service)

Ongoing demand pressures were also seen to impact on the quality of the work, with one participant indicating that when the service system becomes overloaded, it can impact the quality of services.

> "If your demand is manageable, then you can do most of the things that you would want to do, but where the demand is not manageable, and you have waiting lists and holding and... staff having to work out how to bring more staff across from one program to the other to support them...it is very difficult to maintain the quality that you want with extreme demand pressures."
>
> **(CHAIR, REGIONAL ORGANISATION)**

Whilst demand pressures, coupled with short-term funding cycles were seen to have service implications, participants highlighted the importance of ensuring acceptable service standards were met regardless of the external factors impacting upon organisational capacity. On the rare occasions where demand pressures were likely to have an impact on quality, those in leadership would take steps to address the problem, such as instigating discussions with appropriate government departments to facilitate top up funding.

Whilst there was a perception that workforce related issues, coupled with the increasing demand and complexity of the client base, were unfortunately a defining feature of the current field to date, many participants felt there were ways that feminist leadership could be utilised to manage these issues more effectively; for example by being transparent in modelling and communicating to clients and staff about demand and using this to advocate for shifts to targets, funding, flexibility or alternative service delivery models.

Intersectional lens on succession planning and middle management

Strategic planning around shared and flexible working arrangements for those in leadership and middle management roles was considered important, as was the importance of an intersectional approach to succession planning.

> "There's a much higher likelihood in our [disability] community that people in leadership, women in leadership, are going to have to step away for a time because they're unwell...or the mix of parenting and work is...too much... there's a whole array of reasons why that happens."
>
> **(CEO, STATEWIDE ORGANISATION)**

Co-management models were seen as a good way to provide support and ensure management continuity whilst also offering peer mentoring opportunities, however there was recognition that such approaches were not always affordable.

Succession planning informed by an intersectional framework was also considered an important component of feminist leadership. One indigenous participant reported that it is crucial for ACCOs to be actively engaged in succession planning and looking at ways to provide young women with career opportunities and pathways.

> "I think it needs to be an actual deliberate thing... developing skill sets and providing more opportunities for women in the family violence space to work professionally and get skill sets and education, and generationally look at the young people."
>
> **(SENIOR LEADER, REGIONAL ORGANISATION).**

Increasing the number of women in middle management roles, in Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) in particular, was also raised.

> "...when it comes to the management programs, pursuing them, who gets the authority, it's still men... we're good for social engagement, we're good for articulating the issues, but we're not good enough to hold the power now or have authority about how to bring about change out from the top down."
>
> **(SENIOR LEADER, REGIONAL ORGANISATION)**

Enhanced leadership pathways and supports would enable more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women to take on management and feminist leadership roles within the sectors, both within and outside ACCOs.

Whist the importance of having an intersectional approach to these two areas – succession planning and middle management – are being noted here because they were explicitly raised through the interviews, these are obviously not the only elements of feminist leadership that necessitate an intersectional lens; further research and evidence is required to support organisations to embed an intersectional lens across all areas of their work.

Partnership and collaboration

As noted in the discussion on definitions earlier, partnerships, collaboration and the building of formal and informal networks were frequently raised as being critical to the practice feminist leadership and the leadership of feminist work. These practices were seen as critical ways of working as feminist leaders that actually strengthened other enabling factors that were discussed through the interviews. Working collaboratively, both within organisations and across the sectors, provides those in leadership positions with opportunities to develop shared visions and goals, share knowledge and resources, seek and provide peer support, undertake joint strategic planning and advocacy, and build and maintain professional relationships and networks – all of which were seen as critical enablers of feminist leadership in and of themselves. Whilst participants acknowledged that these activities were a crucial aspect of their feminist leadership, many struggled to find the time for them.

> "I think good feminist leadership or governance actually understands that... we have to be connected to other organisations doing similar work. We have to have good strong... peer relationships. We need to be involved in peak bodies."
>
> **(CHAIR, REGIONAL ORGANISATION)**

Participants explained that good leadership is collaborative and outward looking, drawing on the knowledge and expertise of others to inform decision-making.

> "...it's not about you knowing, or having all the answers, or knowing the right thing to do all the time but being collaborative in that approach and listening to people who've got specific expertise in whatever context, and making sure that people's strengths are valued and you're encouraging feedback and contribution into decision-making."
>
> **(GOVERNMENT LEADER)**

Multiple participants cited the merger between DVRCV and DV Vic as an example of feminist leadership in practice, highlighting the importance of the extensive consultation process which occurred.

"...what that example showed was genuine engagement, a clear articulation of values, opportunities for people to not just feel heard, which is infuriating, but be heard as long as that took."

(ACADEMIC-PRACTITIONER FV & LGBTIQ)

Multiple participants echoed this sentiment, identifying the importance of the consultation processes being genuine in nature rather than merely tokenistic. Many believed this to have played a key role in the success of a member vote on the merger.

Collaboration was also seen to play a significant role in the development and sharing of information and resources, particular across the more recently established PVAW sector.

"...the number of prevention people are still relatively small, so you see a lot of... sharing of content and expertise and ideas and... people reviewing different things for other people."

(CEO, GLOBAL VAW ORGANISATION)

Participants felt that this willingness to support others, share resources, and engage with different groups within and across the sectors was an integral part of their feminist leadership practice.

In the Aboriginal family violence context, collaboration was viewed as a useful tool for the empowerment of women.

"I think the family violence space is really helping women get together more collaboratively and actually strengthen, a strength in numbers approach. I've noticed too, when we when we go to meetings and such, we're talking on these issues, family violence particularly, (Indigenous) women have a lot more say and also, we collaborate more. And we come up with solutions a lot more effectively."

(SENIOR LEADER, REGIONAL ORGANISATION)

It was also seen to be important that those in leadership acknowledged the contributions of their staff members rather than claiming accolades for themselves.

Collaboration with organisations outside the specialist PVAW and response sectors was also seen as a critical enabler of effective feminist leadership. It was seen as a way to demonstrate the benefits of the feminist leadership that is commonplace in the FV and PVAW to other sectors who would not usually see this as a style of leadership associated with particular outcomes for system reform or for clients themselves.

"We get to invite people into conversations about the work and come up with shared values. I think that when people are able to articulate shared values....[they] might be pretty similar to the feminist framework that was over here, but you come to it in a really collaborative way, and the partnerships that come out of that are respectful, they're validating the skills and knowledges of different and diverse organisations."

(SENIOR LEADER, SEXUAL ASSAULT SERVICE)

Networks, both formal and informal, play an important role in building partnerships, knowledge sharing, and problem solving within the sectors.

"I have developed strong relationships with other leaders over 20 years of doing this work so when we come to tricky situations, I can have a quiet chat with others, ask for advice and bounce ideas around about how we might approach the situation"

(CEO, STATEWIDE ORGANISATION)

Informal feminist networks enable individuals to tap into the expertise of peers and colleagues. They also provide a place for those who are not in formal positions of power to exert influence over the strategic direction and actions of organisations, and the feminist movement more broadly.

Deliberately creating time and space

The need for adequate time and resourcing for activities that fall outside the realms of core funded activity, and which actually enable feminist leadership and the effective work of feminist organisations, was frequently identified through interviews. The activities that were critical to the success of feminist leadership and practice included reflective practice, professional learning, collaboration and partnership, and strategic advocacy. Whilst such activities are crucial components of feminist leadership and practice, they are often the first things to fall by the wayside when other pressures are high.

"I think to do this work well, you need time to... build relationships, to be reflective, to engage with different groups and listen to different opinions, and all of those things, and that takes time... that's probably one of the things we're not that good at. We're all overworked."

(CEO, GLOBAL VAW ORGANISATION)

Participants spoke of struggling to find the time for strategic planning conversations at both management and board levels.

"I think the other challenge particularly, links to having space to think through what you need to do rather than do what you always have done, and creating that space is a big challenge often, in organisations, that space for planning and space for thinking."

(GOVERNMENT LEADER)

These conversations play a key role in ensuring the day-to-day work is aligned to long-term feminist goals such as gender equality and the eradication of violence against women.

"You can easily get wound up in the day to day and operations... and you can forget why you are there and the difference you are trying to make."

(CHAIR, STATEWIDE SERVICE)

When these conversations are not supported with sufficient time and resourcing, feminist leadership becomes more challenging.

Section 5

The relationship between feminist leadership and the reform context

Leadership within the Victorian FV and PVAW sectors requires feminist leaders to have the ability to navigate an evolving, multi-layered array of prevention and response interventions set within a highly complex and challenging environment. The recent rollout of the Royal Commission reforms, which have precipitated significant system changes such as the introduction of the Multi Agency Risk Assessment and Management (MARAM) framework, new information sharing legislation and the Orange Doors (amongst many others), have drastically increased the challenges faced by leaders within the sectors. In our interviews, participants felt strongly that feminist leadership is naturally well suited to this reform context in many ways because feminist leadership is inherently about change. Feminist principles such as transparency, collaboration, consistency, and an openness to change and ongoing learning are providing a strong foundation for effective leadership in these times of flux and uncertainty.

The current reforms are the most significant, costly, wide-reaching and high-risk (with associated potential for high impact) family violence reforms that have taken place in Victoria. In addition, unlike in previous reform contexts, the current reforms have a dedicated focus not just on the specialist sectors, but on mainstreaming family violence response and primarily prevention across a wide range of sectors. This approach to the work of change and reform is fundamentally different in size, cost, scope, scale, complexity, and risk than the ways in which change progressed early on in the sector's existence in Victoria, where it was often a relatively small group of women who were responsible both for doing the work with victim survivors, and for driving change.

A number of participants observed that working within a rapidly changing and complex landscape was by no means new to them,

> "...change is something that is happening all the time. So yes, this was a major reform but there were other major reforms and other changes going back over twenty or thirty years, so it wasn't as if this was a static sector where not much was happening and then suddenly there was a reform and everything changed."
>
> **(GOVERNANCE AND POLICY SPECIALIST)**

In particular, those in the PVAW sector reported experiencing continual change and reform over the entire (relatively short) lifespan of prevention work in Victoria, with some attributing this to the newness of the sector.

> "...this field of work, primary prevention in particular, is so nascent still. I don't remember a period when things weren't changing so rapidly."
>
> **(SENIOR LEADER, STATEWIDE PVAW ORGANISATION)**

This was seen to have readied feminist leaders in this space for the current reform period.

Whilst many acknowledged that there were unique challenges associated with leading during times of reform, most believed that the sectors were effective at managing change,

> "...there has been an enormous amount of change and the sector has been incredibly adaptable."
>
> **(CHAIR, STATEWIDE SERVICE)**

Despite this, many felt they were battling an external perception that the sectors are resistant to change. Participants explained that this perceived resistance was better described as concern over the quality or usefulness of aspects of the reforms, coupled with the goal of ensuring the scope of the family violence crisis remains firmly in the government's sights, even after the current reforms have been completed.

> "I think probably a lot of what is perceived as resistance is suspicion by the sector in terms of government continually wanting a reform to happen and then for the sector to say, "that's good and that's fixed the problem now" ... but this is a huge, huge issue that we need continued attention and investment in, so you don't want to let government move to the next topic."
>
> **(GOVERNANCE AND POLICY SPECIALIST)**

One participant also suggested that feminist leadership "has potential to reflect and create an imperative to do the reform differently by... talking about slowing it down, by being more collaborative, by being clear about what accountability means. You know, taking it beyond that, it creates a space for other parts of our world to see what women in leadership, in the majority in leadership, can look like." (CEO, statewide organisation) The reforms were seen as a chance to model feminist leadership to those external to the sectors, raising awareness of its strengths as a form of leadership practice, particularly in times of change and uncertainty.

Participants also reflected upon how to best manage the hope inherent in the reform process, alongside their concurrent concerns that it would fail to meet their expectations. After decades of hard work and advocacy to bring the family violence crisis to the attention of the broader community, the Royal Commission reforms were widely viewed as a rare opportunity for significant structural and social change. This was welcomed by the sectors, but some participants indicated that the deeply felt hopes for significant change that the Royal Commission sparked could be difficult to manage at times.

> "Reform was incredibly demanding... it was both draining, resource intensive, and it was dangerous hope... feeling like real change might be able to happen [added] fuel to the smouldering fire that's always been there... there's a certain protective quality to cynicism and even a little cup of despair."
>
> **(SENIOR LEADER, LGBTIQ ORGANISATION)**

Through the interviews, there was a strong sense of support for careful and effective reform and change, coupled with a recognition that there were many issues within the specialist family violence response system that needed to be addressed. However, there was a perception that many of these were seen to be born of systemic or funding issues outside the control of the prevention and response sectors or the feminist leaders within them.

There was also a perception across both sectors that the reforms have been hampered by the lack of a detailed and clearly articulated intention for how all the recommendations sit together as an overarching, systemic reform strategy.

> "... there's not a holistic story about what the reforms are meant to achieve and that everyone agrees on."
>
> **(CEO, STATEWIDE ORGANISATION)**

There was concern that this could result in reduced focus and reflection upon the feminist goals of the sectors and ultimately had the potential to impact negatively upon the experiences of victim/survivors within the system. Participants indicated that the reforms have left many organisations struggling with the practical demands of meeting a raft of new service delivery requirements linked to the implementation of the recommendations. This was seen as a challenge that fell at the feet of feminist leaders to manage, not only in terms of advocacy and partnership work with government, but in terms of managing the impacts on funding, operations, governance as well as the expectations of and frustrations from staff. There was a sense amongst many participants that a lack of a detailed implementation strategy that connects all the reform elements was obscuring long-term feminist goals relating to social transformation.

> "I think we kind of got really buried in the 'how' for a while and... now the task is to kind of really drag ourselves back out of that and to... re-forecast on a new horizon and redefine what it is that needs to be and where we need to go beyond the kind of day to day, and really important mechanics of how we respond"
>
> **(CHAIR, STATEWIDE SERVICE)**

Periods of reform were also believed to increase the challenges of feminist leadership due to the enhanced complexity around organisational strategy, increased workloads and time pressures, and the challenge of holding and supporting staff through uncertainty and change. "I think in the real heat of those reforms...the amount of work you had to do strategically was exhausting. It was just exhausting because you were just looking to understand the landscape all the time. And of course, everything was changing so quickly." (Senior leader, regional organisation) Many spoke of experiencing exhaustion due to the relentless pace of the reforms and the necessity of maintaining an ongoing, strategic engagement with the process, at the same times as leading critical services.

The reform context has required those in feminist leadership, management and governance positions to balance their passionate belief in the end goals of social transformation against the unrelenting pace and cost of the work. Many participants acknowledged working long, unpaid, additional hours striving to achieve this balance, driven by their feminist mission coupled with their desire as feminist leaders to see the reforms be as successful as possible.

> "How many hours of time have women leaders in our sectors put into this work above and beyond what they are paid to do?"
>
> **(SENIOR LEADER, STATEWIDE PVAW ORGANISATION)**

This was seen as an increasingly standard requirement of leadership roles, in any field, however many participants felt it was at odds with the principles of feminist leadership that were focused around equal and fair remuneration, recognition of the additional roles that women play in their lives outside of work and creating spaces conducive to diversity and inclusion. (See *Effective workforce planning and demand modelling* in Section 4 for more detail on workforce pressures).

The reform environment regularly required those in leadership and management positions to juggle short-term concerns alongside long-term strategies in the hope of achieving the best outcome in both areas.

> "I guess the challenge for any managers, governance groups going through such big change is... being quite clear that the day-to-day is important, what you do right now is important, but then we also need to be moving with the times and also advocating for... the best possible outcome out of the reform process in line with our vision."
>
> **(GOVERNANCE AND POLICY SPECIALIST)**

There was the sense that during times of reform the feminist leadership principle of collectivity is crucial, with leaders needing to be "far more sophisticated and strategic about working collectively, working cooperatively with others, or co-design processes". (Chair, regional organisation)

Another issue raised by many participants was the fact that the Royal Commission reforms have been driven by the government rather than the specialist family violence response and primary prevention sectors. There was a commonly held concern that the specialist family violence response and primary prevention sectors have been less involved in the early conceptualisation, design and implementation planning stages of the reforms. Whilst the Victorian government has consulted widely on many of the reforms, there was a sense from interview participants that their expertise would have added stronger value at a much earlier stage of the reform journey, before decisions about high level function, purpose, structure and implementation were made.

Some participants also reported that the significant influx in funding over the past few years has created a more competitive environment which was seen by some to be at odds with the principles of feminist leadership, which are more focused on the importance of collective activity to achieve a long-term goal.

> "I think in any major reform... when it's accompanied by new policies and money, there is always more competition between organisations to get... funds and a bit, not everywhere, but a bit more sense of holding on to things rather than working collaboratively."
>
> **(CHAIR, REGIONAL ORGANISATION)**

Others spoke of how feminist leadership had been instrumental in actually *encouraging* collaboration during a challenging time.

> "We saw organisations that have overlapping remit and they put that aside to come to the table and work together. I know it was tricky but putting in joint submissions to the Royal Commission and coming together around shared messaging. I think that that's an example of feminist leadership."
>
> **(SENIOR LEADER, STATEWIDE PVAW ORGANISATION)**

A number of participants expressed appreciation of the government's willingness to engage with feminist frameworks such as intersectionality, but some expressed concerns over the conceptual watering down of this feminist approach and the pace of the changes in this area.

"There's these higher ideals around feminist leadership, including intersectionality, that are often signposted and even required, and I'm passionate about them. And I wanted to see us get there, but I want us to do the necessary work to get there."

(SENIOR LEADER, LGBTIQ ORGANISATION)

Several participants expressed the view that this type of work must be allocated sufficient time and resources to develop successfully at a practice level.

"...to enable a real intersectional framework to operate in the prevention and family violence sectors, a lot more work needs to happen."

(SENIOR STAFF MEMBER, STATEWIDE ORGANISATION)

While there was a desire to see intersectionality better embedded in the work the sectors do, some felt that such a significant change required a more gradual implementation to support sustained and embedded cultural and organisational change.

"Whilst we all want to look at a framework that unpacks the construction of our politics of liberation in the first place, we can't do that overnight. So, we've got to sort of unpack it almost incrementally, without losing sight of the strength of patriarchy, and all of those contexts."

(FV AND CALD SPECIALIST)

Whilst some participants expressed the view that embedding intersectionality in their practice could be challenging at times, they also indicated that much progress has been made in this area since the Royal Commission into family violence.

Overall, feminist leadership practices appear to have assisted those in the sectors to navigate a period of intense change and transformation that has been brought about by the Royal Commission reforms. For most, the reforms have not necessarily changed the way they lead, but they have foregrounded the importance of particular feminist principles and approaches such as collaboration, clarity of communication, and transparency around organisational processes and decision-making.

Section 6

The complexities of contemporary feminist leadership in practice

Feminist leadership practice within the FV and PVAW sectors was seen to have a number of specific complexities. Firstly, the idealised nature of much of the literature on feminist leadership makes it difficult to fully or consistently achieve in practice. Secondly, participants spoke of the complex, multi-layered system of feminist accountability that they must navigate in their day-to-day practice, which spans accountability to themselves, each other, their staff and organisations and the broader feminist movement. Other issues raised included the challenges of enacting feminist leadership practices within the context of external legal and regulatory frameworks, the importance of having hard conversations, and the personal price of feminist leadership. Each of these factors contribute to making feminist leadership practice complex and challenging and are discussed in more detail below.

Idealised nature of feminist leadership theory

Participants indicated that existing definitions and goals of feminist leadership tend to be highly idealised and subjective in nature. The expectation that feminist leadership work be socially transformational was seen to place an unrealistically heavy burden on individuals.

"I spent my whole working life trying to improve circumstances for children in particular but also women who are affected by violence and abuse. But the plight of too many children and women is still not well understood and is highly concerning... ... I was not able to achieve transformational leadership at all....[but] I worked pretty bloody hard at it."

(CHAIR, REGIONAL ORGANISATION)

Whilst participants generally agreed that social transformation was the overarching goal of their work, it was considered outside of the scope of any one individual to achieve.

"I think transformational leadership goes beyond an organisation, I think that's the thing... you can do a certain amount in that space that you are within your organisation, but to actually achieve significant transformational leadership, it demands a whole lot more than just your organisation... collaborations, public opinion, political will..."

(CHAIR, REGIONAL ORGANISATION)

Social transformation was viewed as a long-term collective goal rather than a useful measure of individual leadership success.

The idealised nature of feminist leadership, and its transformational goals that can be often un-attainable for a single person, make it hard for individuals to balance their own feminist values against the overarching frameworks informing their work.

"I guess that feminist leadership, when we look at that list, it's very, very idealised, and often it can't be reached in every instance. So, you do have to enact the organisational policy or follow the HR process and maybe you can't be everything on that list in that moment, because there are competing demands like IR laws."

(SENIOR MANAGER, NATIONAL ORGANISATION)

This raised questions for some around the practical challenges of feminist leadership in the field, highlighting the unique challenges the sectors face when juggling legal and regulatory obligations against feminist goals of social transformation.

"Does feminist leadership mean in every single moment, in every single instance, you have to be following that frame? Or does it just mean that when you step back and across a year or across your whole leadership style... if you take a bit of a broader lens... does it mean that you can make those choices in individual instances and still say you're a feminist leader more broadly or across the whole breadth of your work?"

(SENIOR MANAGER, NATIONAL ORGANISATION)

The recent Royal Commission reforms appear to have increased the burden upon those in leadership roles by increasing the focus on outputs (e.g. How many clients were seen, how many L17s were responded to) rather than impact outcomes (the positive change that was made for the victim survivor's safety and life) as the key measure of success. Such an approach created pressures which were counterproductive to feminist leadership approaches;

"It also creates for leaders and managers and governance... that pressure that women always have, we always have it, to be doing more, and to be doing better, and to be on top of everything... It's like you give feminist leaders 227 recommendations and say, 'You've got to be on top of this all the time.'"

(CEO, STATEWIDE ORGANISATION)

This pressure to make a difference in the world and precipitate significant social change was incredibility difficult to realise as an individual, and one of the reasons collectivity was viewed to be critical to effective feminist leadership. Working together towards the shared goals of gender equality and the eradication of violence against women was seen to provide peer support and a sharing of the burden of feminist work within the family violence and PVAW fields.

Feminist leaders have accountability to themselves, to each other, and to the wider movement

As discussed earlier in this report, the concept of accountability was seen as critical to feminist leadership in the PVAW and FV sectors. For some, this meant accountability to the wider feminist movement and the histories of the sectors they work within, for others it was more about interpersonal accountability to feminist principles and ensuring that leaders are acting as 'critical friends' to other leaders to encourage effective feminist leadership practices and behaviours. There was a general belief that strong feminist leadership involved having the courage to challenge problematic behaviours by other leaders in the sector. However, multiple participants spoke of the complexity and importance of doing this in a way that was feminist in itself, and which did not feed assumptions that are made about feminist movements or sectors, or undermine 'sister' organisations who were doing good work to prevent and respond to family violence and violence against women.

A small number of participants raised the issue of people who call themselves feminist leaders (or those who work in feminist organisations) acting in ways to replicate the oppressive power structures that feminism seeks to dismantle. Such behaviour was considered fundamentally opposed to the principles of feminist leadership, and these participants clearly expressed the view that feminist leadership was more than a title that a person could bestow upon themselves, it had to be lived and practiced.

"...if you are replicating that violence, if you are replicating systems of discrimination, then you're not a feminist and that can't be part of anything that is conceived of as feminist."

(ACADEMIC-PRACTITIONER FV & LGBTIQ)

However, the tension between behaviour that is very obviously not aligned to feminist principles (such as respect, accountability or equity) and behaviour that is *perceived* to be un-feminist is also an issue that is discussed regularly by feminist leaders. Given how subjective and deeply or personally held feminist principles and practice can be, there are times where actions taken by feminist leaders were perceived to be 'un-feminist' according to the values and principles of an individual person (who is often, but not always, a person who holds less formal organisational power than the feminist leader) but which in fact may actually be aligned to the definitions of feminist leadership and management outlined in this report.

The complexity of navigating individual beliefs and values about what feminist practice is, and is not, was a common experience that participants spoke about, and many suggested that it was important for them – and the sector more broadly – to continue to have challenging conversations about these concepts and what they look like in practice in a range of different contexts and situations. Whilst there was a strong sense through the interviews that those in leadership positions have a responsibility to call out inappropriate behaviour to support growth and improvement within the sectors, there was also a recognition that it is possible for concepts such as 'feminism' and 'accountability' to be "weaponised within particular spaces as a way of controlling and silencing people" and that this practice causes harm not only to those individuals involved, but to the work of the sectors – and the wider feminist movement – more broadly.

Perhaps as a result of this risk, a small number of participants suggested there is a reluctance amongst those in leadership roles to publicly critique the actions of their peers or others who are working in the space.

> "As feminists, we're not really good at taking bystander action... and actually giving our peers a bit of solid feedback that's respectful and honest."
>
> **(PVAW AND VAW SPECIALIST)**

Whilst there was a belief that it was important for those in leadership roles to critique the actions of their peers where needed, it was also believed that such conversations were often best held privately and respectfully in order to facilitate positive change. When such critiques were avoided due to discomfort, it was seen to create a permissive environment where feminist values and principles could be easily compromised.

The multi-layered levels of feminist accountability that individual feminist leaders spoke about feeling they needed to consider in their day-to-day practice is a unique element of leadership in a feminist context, and of feminist leadership itself. This three-tiered approach, strongly tied to the importance of self-reflection as feminist leaders, is an added layer of complexity that feminist leaders need to actively engage with through the course of their work as leaders in the PVAW and response sectors.

Conflicts with other frameworks

Participants also spoke of the challenges faced as feminist leaders who also operated within the context of external legal and regulatory frameworks. Whilst there was a sense that some staff believed feminist frameworks are fundamental misaligned with other frameworks (for example, industrial relations frameworks), those we interviewed expressed a range of opinions on the issue. Difficult decisions such as implementing organisational restructures or performance managing staff were seen as necessary but discomforting aspects of leadership by most interview participants. Others viewed these processes as a standard responsibility of an executive leadership role, indicating that what mattered most in the context of feminist leadership was that they were managed in line with feminist principles and that where there were often structural factors that led to these decisions – for example, inadequate funding – that longer term advocacy was undertaken to shift these systemic issues.

There was general consensus that working within highly feminised and under resourced sectors increases the challenges of feminist leadership. Participants felt that they had a responsibility to support female staff, who make up the bulk of the sectors given the highly feminised nature of FV and PVAW work and help to improve their workplace experience. Whilst some admitted to finding themselves in personal disagreement with specific legal and regulatory frameworks (for example, industrial relations or human resources) at times, they nonetheless believed it important as professionals that they comply with them.

> "Obviously there will be some laws that we don't agree with... as an organisation you have that responsibility to comply. This doesn't necessarily diminish... your ability as a governance body to give the organisation a strong authorising environment to advocate for transformation."
>
> **(CHAIR, STATEWIDE SERVICE)**

The role of advocacy was seen to be of particular importance in such circumstances.

> "You can comply while advocating for change. You don't not comply. You definitely comply and you advocate for change."
>
> **(GOVERNANCE AND POLICY SPECIALIST)**

The importance of hard conversations

Hard conversations were identified as an important element of feminist leadership practice and were seen to fall into three broad categories: those about organisational strategy, interpersonal discussions about an individual's work performance or role within the organisation, and those about challenging the status quo (whether that was internally within the sector, or more broadly within the feminist movement to which many – but not all – participants felt they and their organisations belonged).

The ability to successfully navigate difficult conversations around organisational strategy was seen by many as essential to good feminist leadership. As one participant explained,

> "organisations don't exist for staff, they exist for a purpose, to create a change or to deliver a product or whatever. They are not there for the staff, the staff are there to help the organisation deliver the purpose, so sometimes you need to restructure, sometimes you need to create redundancies..."
>
> **(GOVERNANCE AND POLICY SPECIALIST)**

When difficult decisions had to be made in the best interests of the organisation, what mattered was that they were approached according to feminist principles.

> "I do think there are lots of challenging conversations to be had... how you address it is... you be transparent and consultative, you run a good process, you make yourself available... for conversations and unless there's a good reason not to do it, you do it."
>
> **(CHAIR, STATEWIDE SERVICE)**

Participants acknowledged that there are situations that arise within the FV and PVAW sectors where people avoid publicly challenging prevalent beliefs or policy settings they disagreed with out of fear of reprisal from colleagues, other leaders in the space, from those in wider social justice spaces, or from government. When there were conflicting views such as this, participants reported that it was common for people to remain silent out of fear if their views were pushing against the status quo, either of the wider social justice movement or of their organisational culture. Creating an environment where such conversations that respectfully challenged the status quo and progressed language, theory or concepts for the benefit of the work could occur was considered crucial to the ongoing growth and improvement of the sectors.

There was also a perception (particularly amongst some of the interview participants who have been working in this field for many decades) that the appetite for difficult conversations within the prevention and response sectors has reduced over recent years, leaving less opportunity to clarify communal goals and negotiate a shared path to social transformation.

"It's that stuff that's gone, where we can't have open hard conversations... you both sort of started [this interview] by saying, you know, if you start feeling uncomfortable [you can end the interview], well, I think maybe that's what we've lost a little bit, that, the sitting with that discomfort. I'm not talking about being disrespectful or creating unsafe places for people. That for me is an absolute no-no but creating a space that does start to make you want to shift around a little bit is a good thing. Diving deeper into...how are we unconsciously contributing to reproducing the very dynamics that we claim to be addressing? Back in the old days... that's what a lot of those feminist conferences were about, really being able to have difficult conversations. Because ultimately, we were clear about what our shared communal commitment was, it was transparent. And it was clear, not perfect, not from a long shot. And often we got it wrong...even that I feel is kind of been eroded."

(FV AND CALD SPECIALIST)

Some were concerned that this reticence has led to reduced cohesion across the sectors, having a negative impact on advocacy.

The price of feminist leadership

Participants also expressed concerns about the inherent risks involved in the practice of feminist leadership – this wasn't identified as a barrier per se but was raised by a number of participants as something that is unique to feminist leaders in the family violence and primary prevention sectors, as opposed to leaders in other fields. There was a shared view it is important to talk as a field about both the risks and the cost of feminist leadership.

"... every leadership style has its prices; nothing is ever perfect. And I think sometimes there's not an articulation of the price you pay in this leadership style."

(CEO, STATEWIDE ORGANISATION)

One participant spoke about the cost of feminist leadership for Indigenous women, who can experience ongoing lateral violence from community, in addition to the more 'mainstream' backlash to their feminist work.

"... when women step up to the floor, they cop a lot more critiquing and lateral violence as well in that space because of patriarchy, so it can be both rewarding but also quite a sacrifice."

(SENIOR LEADER, REGIONAL ORGANISATION)

The benefit of making these risks and costs more visible is that it would enable both current and new feminist leaders to be more strategic, be more proactive about self-care and collective resilience building, and that this openness and transparency may also have the potential to support greater connection and collaboration amongst emerging and more experienced feminist leaders.

Some indicated that both within the sectors and outside them, there are currently inadequate mechanisms to help mitigate such risks.

"...one of the things that is not recognised is that in training people to be better feminists, it actually makes them less able to live safely and collude with the structures of power. I feel like if we are going to try and teach people the principles of feminist leadership and of real courage in the space, we need to have some brave conversations around the cost of standing in the face of these things and the risks that are presented...because if we are going to give people these tools we also need to give them the ability to look after themselves and keep themselves safe."

(SENIOR LEADER, LGBTIQ ORGANISATION)

Burnout due to constantly anticipating or managing backlash and resistance was reported as another common cost of feminist leadership across both the prevention and response sectors. Participants spoke of the challenges of working in the face of significant ongoing resistance (both explicit and implicit) to a gendered analysis of family violence from a range of individuals, groups, organisations and institutions, despite there being a rigorous global evidence base to support their work.

Section 7

Why is feminist leadership critical to the success of the family violence and PVAW sectors?

Feminist leadership has played an instrumental role in shining a light on the 'silent epidemic' of family violence across our nation. Feminist leaders in the Victorian PVAW and FV response sectors have spent decades building a strong, robust evidence base around the gendered nature of family violence and what works to prevent it. Their work has helped to drive policy and legislative reform and improved the lives of hundreds of thousands of women and children across the state; "Victoria has been at the forefront of family violence policy development and reform in Australia for the past 15 years and has been influential in propelling reforms in other Australian and international jurisdictions. This work has been driven by and has built on decades of grassroots work and advocacy by the women's movement". In just a few decades, feminist leaders here and across the globe have contributed to dramatically raising community awareness of family violence and its devastating impacts and started changing attitudes that support violence and inequality. These feminist leaders have played a role – individually and collectively – in slowly but steadily progressing along the long, gradual path towards social and structural transformation.

"...look at the change we have made already... in terms of family violence and violence against women... this is now a mainstream issue where really, not long ago, it was just a women's issue and not a concern to anybody beyond that family. What a huge change there has been in terms of people's understanding. You know, there was a young woman, a woman murdered this week and people are outraged by it, mainstream people are outraged by it, politicians are outraged by it. That's a big change. A few years ago, not long ago, that would have just been a passing thing, if it had been reported at all, it would have just been... such a minor blip and everyone would have just said, 'oh well, it's just a domestic' and that was absolutely the reality we came from, so what a huge change we've had."

(GOVERNANCE AND POLICY SPECIALIST)

As well as providing community education around the issue of family violence, feminist leaders across the two sectors have spent decades exploring its dynamics, tracing its prevalence, researching and testing prevention frameworks, programs and models, and developing better ways of working with perpetrators to keep women and children safe. They have built practice models, toolkits and conceptual frameworks to inform practice within the sector. They have advocated for increased funding to meet escalating community demand and campaigned for the sectors' work and expertise to be valued within the social services system. They have created research models that will help us understand the changes that are being made over the longer term. Feminist leadership has played a key role in placing violence against women on the public agenda in Victoria as a health issue, a safety issue, a social justice issue, a women's issue, and a gender equality issue.

Whilst this report has focused specifically on feminist leadership in the not-for-profit Victorian PVAW and specialist FV sectors, it is important to acknowledge that feminist leadership can occur anywhere – in the corporate sector, in government, led by local communities and groups, and in online spaces – and all play an important role in advancing the feminist agenda of social transformation. Strong feminist leadership across all of these areas is crucial to achieving a society based on equality, justice, diversity and inclusion.

"I've grown up being a feminist. I can't imagine it any other way... it's important because we live in a society that discriminates against women and girls in particular, but also it's important [because] we l ive in such an unequal society in relation to power structures, whether that's in relation to women's rights in particular, or whether it's looking at the intersecting discriminations and power imbalances that impact on women in relation to... their class, or their ability, or sexuality, or ethnicity, background, or religion, I think until we address those and transform society to liberate woman and girls from those oppressions, I don't think you cannot be a feminist really."

(GOVERNMENT LEADER)

Emerging global evidence shows that independent feminist movements play an instrumental role in influencing the social, cultural and political change required to successfully address the issue of violence against women. Indeed, their influence upon policy development has been found to be greater than that of left-leaning political parties, women working within parliament, or national wealth. The advocacy of feminist movements – and the feminist leaders within them – helps to change community views about violence against women, reframing it from being a personal issue, to one of human rights and social justice, and encourages governments to use what levers they have at their disposal to progress positive social change.

Feminist leadership has a critical role to play in addressing gender inequality and family violence within our community but cannot do so effectively without an enabling environment. Our research has identified a range of areas in which work can be done – by governments, by organisations, by leaders and staff – to better encourage and enable feminist leadership in the PVAW and FV response sectors in Victoria. Within the sectors, greater time and opportunity for feminist leadership work such as partnerships and networking, reflective practice, and sector-wide collaboration and strategising around vision and purpose are needed. External to the sector, measures such as effective workforce planning and demand modelling, a clear and consistent evidence base, increased understanding and commitment from government and other stakeholders of the importance and effectiveness of the principles and values of feminist work and expertise, and adequate funding that enables certainty and stability were all seen to be crucial to supporting feminist leadership. Measures such as these would not only enable more effective feminist leadership within the sectors, resulting in improved outcomes for victim/survivors, they would also help to support the social transformation required to achieve gender equality and eliminate family violence.

"...we don't just do feminist leadership because we say we're feminists, and therefore we should, it actually makes sense... it works... it's useful... I think everyone would benefit, all organisations, feminist or not, would benefit from that model."

(CEO, GLOBAL VAW ORGANISATION)

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